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ALL-STORY WEEKLY



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by Isabel Ostrander

AND A NOVEL
The
SQUEEZE WHEEL
by E.K. Means

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NOTE—This statement is to be made in duplicate, both copies to be delivered by the publisher to the Postmaster, who will send one copy to the Third Assistant Postmaster-General (Division of Classification), Washington, D. C., and retain the other in the files of the Post-Office.

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Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared WM. T. DEWART, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24th, 1912, embodied in Section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations. To wit:

That the names and addresses of the Publisher, Editor, Managing Editor, and Business Manager are:

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- Editor—ROBERT H. DAVIS, 8 West 40th Street, New York, N. Y.
- Managing Editor, ROBERT H. DAVIS, 8 West 40th Street, New York, N. Y.
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WM. T. DEWART, Business Manager.

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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOL. LXX

NUMBER 3



SATURDAY, APRIL 28, 1917



Mystery of the Poison Pen by Isabel Ostrander

Author of "The Man Who Died," "Eyes That Saw Not," "The Heritage of Cain," etc.

WE doubt if there is anything more despicable than the anonymous letter that is born of malicious intent, and there are several people in this clever, highly entertaining and thoroughly well written three-part serial who agree with us. But, as " 'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody good," Irvin Lawrence has no reason to complain of the activities of this not at all particular "ill wind."
THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

"MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD."

IRVIN LAWRENCE stood staring glumly from the window of his law office down on the bustling, sun-drenched square, where Maple Avenue bisected the State Boulevard.

He drummed idly upon the glass, but it was not with impatience because of his secretary's tardiness; he knew too well that when she arrived there would be little if anything for her to do. The blotter on his desk was almost as immaculate as his letter tray was empty, although the

glaring freshness of his name-plate outside had taken on quite a respectable look of age from its exposure to the elements for six weary months.

He turned with relief when the telephone rang.

"Oh, hello, Middlemarch. The golf tournament? No, I don't think so, I have one or two matters to attend to— Oh, I might as well, I suppose— Meet you at the Country Club for lunch at one. All right."

As he hung up the receiver the door opened breezily and a slender, gray-eyed girl entered.

"Oh, I'm late! I'm so sorry, Mr. Lawrence. Was there anything—?"

"Nothing of great importance, Miss Dial." He smiled whimsically, and going to the desk began shuffling about some papers lying there. "Let me see, what was the last case we had?"

"Cross *versus* Dalrymple — damages for a dog-bite—settled out of court three weeks ago," she replied with disconcerting promptitude as she seated herself at her typewriter.

"And before that?"

"You drew four wills for old Mr. Penypacker, and defended Wellington Locust on that charge of chicken stealing preferred by—"

"Oh, I know!" Young Lawrence gave a gesture of disgust. "And that's all, positively all, to show for six months spent in Lymebrook."

"Mr. Lawrence, what did you ever come here for?" The girl spoke impulsively, and then a dark, embarrassed flush mounted to her forehead. "Oh, I didn't mean quite that, but I simply cannot imagine anybody coming to Lymebrook from choice and staying here."

"But you came back."

"I? From the business college, you mean? But this was my home town, you know, although I haven't a real home here any more, or a person alive belonging to me. I knew every one here, and I thought it would be easier for me." A faint, enigmatic smile curled her lips. "I was too much of a coward to start out in a world of strangers. But with you it's so very different."

"Well, you see, I wasn't making any headway in the law office in New York." He leaned toward her in a boyish outburst of confidence. "Graduated at the head of my class and then sat down for a two-years' grind as little better than a clerk, drawing tiresome old briefs and never seeing the inside of a court-room, or consulting with a client of my own.

"I thought I'd do better out here in a fashionable, fairly wealthy community, but, hang it, they're too peaceful and law-

abiding, or they take all their real business to town. If I could only get hold of one good case, it would give me a start. I don't stand the chance of a book agent in a Carnegie library town."

"I suppose the law is like everything else," remarked Katherine Dial, dusting her spotless typewriter with assiduous care. "Where you've got something to sell, whether it's legal advice or books, or—or automobiles, and there doesn't seem to be any demand for it, why you just have to create a demand."

"I can't very well go out and commit a cold-blooded, deliberate crime and then let some one hire me to defend myself, can I?" He laughed half ruefully.

"Well, hardly; but something must turn up. Just look at what Mr. Leahy's done, for instance. Several people had cars before he came, of course, but they were mostly the expensive kinds, and the majority couldn't afford them. Now he's sold a Paragon to every one who has a stable or chicken-house which could be converted into a garage. Isn't it splendid?"

Irvin Lawrence's face darkened perceptibly.

"And I suppose if I stick around here long enough I'll have as many lawsuits as I can handle over those same little, tin buzz-wagons," he retorted with undue asperity. "In about six months they'll break down like the wonderful one-horse shay, but our glib-tongued friend, Leahy, won't be here to listen to the murmurs of wrath, you may depend upon that—he'll be off sticking some other gullible community with them. I'm thinking of getting a car myself, if things go a little brighter soon—a good car. Don't you think you'd like a Nonpareil, for instance, better than a Paragon?"

He had turned his chair slightly toward hers, when the door was flung violently open, and a young man precipitated himself across the threshold. He was a tall, clean-cut young man, broad of shoulder and candid of eye. Just now his eyes were rolling nervously, almost furtively,

from side to side, and his face was as black as a thunder-cloud.

"Hello, Dick." The lawyer, without half glancing at his friend, motioned toward a chair. "Sit down—won't be a minute. Finishing a little dictation, and then I'm going to shut up shop for the day. Middlemarch phoned me just now; going to meet him at lunch—"

Richard Draper, Jr., made an inarticulate noise in his throat, and Lawrence swung about and surveyed him with dawning surprise.

"I say, old man, what's up?"

"Everything!" Dick croaked. "I'm in a deuce of a hole, and I don't know how I got in it, or how on earth I'm ever going to get out unless you help me!"

"Help you—of course I will!" Lawrence responded heartily. "But what sort of a hole, Dickie? You haven't tried to climb anybody's fence with your Paragon, have you, or bounced your only rich uncle out of the tonneau—"

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, don't try to be funny!" groaned his unhappy visitor. "This is serious, I tell you—dead serious. In fact, it's likely to be tragic. Nannie's telegraphed all her relatives, and she's packing up her wedding presents right now. What a fool I was to let her open it!"

"Open what-t?" Lawrence exploded, his patience at an end.

"A letter that came this morning—an anonymous letter. One of those poison-pen things you read about in the papers all the time. You know, the kind that say nothing definite, and yet mean everything. Why the crank, whoever it is, should have picked on me as a victim, is beyond me. I can't make head or tail of the beastly thing, and I'm as innocent of what it suggests as you are."

"And your wife—she doesn't believe that?"

"Not in a million years!" Dickie ejaculated with gloomy vehemence. "That's why I came to you."

Katherine Dial removed the half-typed sheet from her machine and rose.

"Perhaps you would like to consult Mr. Lawrence alone, Mr. Draper," she said. "I can wait in the other office—"

"No, don't, Miss Dial. It's all right. I would prefer to have you stay, and I know you will regard all this as strictly confidential. I brought the letter with me." Dickie fumbled helplessly in one pocket after another, and finally produced a much-crumpled envelope. "Here it is. Perhaps you can help us get an inkling as to who wrote it. This looks like a woman's handwriting, doesn't it? But then you never can tell."

With shaking fingers he extracted the folded sheet of notepaper from the envelope and held both out to the lawyer.

Lawrence passed the envelope on to Miss Dial and glanced cursorily over the letter. "H'm.

"My dear Mr. Draper [he read aloud].

"If you will call at the post-office, you will be given a package containing some property belonging to your companion of last Sunday evening—a blue motor-veil which was dropped from your automobile at midnight on the Uplands turnpike. For reasons which you will appreciate, I have not returned it to you at your home.

"A FRIEND.

"Looks bad for you, Dickie. Who was the lady? I'm asking as your legal adviser, of course. What on earth were you doing, motoring around the country with her—on Sunday night, too?"

"I wasn't," snarled his goaded client. "There was no lady, and I didn't go out—I mean in my car—Sunday night."

"Where were you, then? At church with your wife?"

Dickie shook his head.

"No," he confessed miserably, "I can't stand church twice a day, especially when old Dr. Skidmore preaches at the evening service, too. That's why Nannie is so up in the air about this whole business. I can't tell her where I was Sunday night."

"Can't tell her!" the lawyer repeated, raising his eyebrows.

"If she believed me there would be almost as bad a row as we've had over this, but she wouldn't, anyway, so what's the

use? Oh, I didn't do anything criminal! It was only that I had made my wife a promise and forgotten it. You see, she thinks it's downright wicked to gamble, and whenever I sit in a quiet little game with the boys, as I used to do before we were married, she doesn't let me hear the last of it for a month. If she knew that I lost fifty dollars at the Willow Tree Inn, and on Sunday night, too, she'd never forgive me. She was brought up so religiously, you know."

Katherine Dial coughed discreetly.

"Er—I believe Mrs. Draper plays bridge, doesn't she?" she asked demurely.

"Of course, but not for real money. Those hen-parties on the country-club veranda don't amount to anything."

"Still, it's the principle involved," Miss Dial went on meditatively. "I was just thinking that it might be a good way to—er—get back."

"By Jove, that never occurred to me!" Dickie eyed her in genuine admiration. "It takes a woman to think up an argument for one of her own sex. But—" and his face darkened again—"that infernal letter! What shall we do about it?"

"Do? Do nothing," the lawyer responded. "Just forget it, that's all, Dickie. Even if you find out who wrote it, you haven't got a case against them. The letter is too vague. It looks to me as if some would-be comedian had played a practical joke on you, or else was trying to stir up trouble. The best attitude for you to take would be to ignore it utterly."

He paused as an insistent, staccato clicking came to his ears. Miss Dial was softly but impatiently tapping the keys of her typewriter.

"But that's just what I can't do," Dickie groaned. "If only I hadn't been fool enough to let Nannie open the letter first, it would be all right, but now the fat is in the fire."

"I should think so." Miss Dial rose and faced them. "Did you know, Mr. Draper, that this letter had been opened and resealed?"

"No!" almost shouted Dickie, taking

the envelope from her extended hand. "Look, Lawrence, you can see where the flap has been opened and regummed. Miss Dial is right. Well, what do you know about that!"

"But I thought you said—" The lawyer caught himself up abruptly.

"That I let Nannie open it myself?" the other man finished for him. "I did, I told her to. But that was only after she had egged me on so that I took a chance. That must have been just what she was leading me up to. I never thought she had it in her."

He turned and walked to the window, where he stood with his back to them both. After a moment's hesitation Miss Dial advanced toward her employer and said in a lowered tone:

"You're going to take the case, aren't you, Mr. Lawrence?"

"But there isn't any case in this," he objected quickly.

Miss Dial turned away with a shrug.

"Of course, you know best," she murmured. "But if any client came to me with such a tale, I would try to investigate it for him—and I'd take a handsome retaining fee, too. Of course, if you prefer wills and dog-bites—"

"By George! You're right, Miss Dial. I never thought of that end of it." He paused for a moment, and then addressed himself to the man at the window. "Well, Dickie, if I'm going to undertake this case for you, don't you think you had better tell me all about it?"

"There is nothing to tell," his client replied. Then inconsequently: "I went back to the house an hour ago for some contracts which I had forgotten, and I found my wife away up in the air. I could see that she had been crying, but she'd stopped when I got there and was mad clean through. I couldn't imagine what the trouble was, and Nannie wouldn't tell me until she had gotten me all worked up, too, and then she pointed dramatically to my desk and demanded to know what woman was writing letters to me.

"Of course I knew that nobody was doing any such thing, but Nannie insisted that the handwriting was a woman's, and she threatened to go into hysterics again. Of course, I lost my temper and took a chance, as I said before; I dared her to open the letter and convince herself. And she did!"

"And you want me—"

"To find who wrote that despicable thing and put them in jail! Also, to get that veil from the post-office. I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole, but I'm not going to have it left there with my name on it, for the whole town to gossip about."

"Don't you think if I, as your legal representative, go to the postmaster and demand that veil, it will cause more talk than if you go yourself quite naturally and claim it as your wife's? Mrs. Draper won't want any open scandal about this any more than you do. Of course—"

The lawyer paused, cleared his throat portentously, and glanced at his demure secretary with the slightest contraction of one eyelid.

"I won't deny, Dickie, that things look mighty black for you. An insinuation like this is a rather serious matter to disprove, especially when it's backed up by such tangible evidence as the veil. Of course, you haven't been specifically accused of anything, but if we can discover who wrote this letter we can at least demand an explanation. There are several aspects which you must consider.

"This may be, as I said, an attempt at a practical joke. If it is, you can get back at the perpetrator of it in any way you like, but you'll want to do it quietly. Don't advertise the fact that you've been had—or you'll never hear the last of it. On the other hand, the writer of this may prove to be a crank or a downright lunatic, and in denouncing him—or her, you may bring disgrace and trouble upon a whole innocent family."

"They didn't care how much trouble they made for me with my family," Dickie retorted. "Of course, I'm not hankering for any notoriety; all I want is

to be cleared in my wife's eyes, to tell the writer of that letter just what I think of them, and to be sure that this sort of thing stops right here. I don't want any more unsigned letters to come breaking up my home."

"I'll do my best for you," Lawrence promised, then added quickly as an afterthought: "It ought to be easy to convince Mrs. Draper that you are innocent."

Dickie shook his head gloomily.

"You don't know her."

"But if you went to a poker game and she to church, neither of you used your car. She can't drive it herself, I've heard her say so, and you wouldn't be likely to leave it standing at the curb outside the Willow Tree Inn to advertise the fact that you were there. Just convince her that the car was in your garage all night. Tell her a— a plausible story to account for the early hours of the evening and stick to it, Dickie, and everything will be all right as far as she is concerned."

"Can't be done," his client responded. "I've told her three different stories already, and I can't prove that the car was in the garage, because it wasn't."

"In that case you'd better admit that you used it, and where you went. Tell her the truth, bring her to see me if you like, and we'll work together to get the identity of the letter-writer."

"But I didn't have the car out myself—that's just it," blurted forth Dickie desperately. "If any joy-riding did take place, I know one of the parties involved, at least, although I can scarcely credit it. But I can't tell her or even you who had the car that night."

"If you're not going to be perfectly frank with me—" he began.

"But I tell you, man, I can't; I've given my word! It wouldn't be fair to involve anybody else in this trouble, just to clear my own heels, especially when they've trusted me. Besides, the—the person who took my car out could not be connected in any way with the writer of this letter. Nannie will have to believe me—believe one of my stories, I mean;

she can take her choice. I haven't done any harm except to sit in a little game when I had said I wouldn't, and if anybody wishes a veil on me, and an anonymous note, and maybe a divorce—it's not my fault. I'm through! If you won't take my word for it, that I wasn't in the car Sunday night—"

"Aren't you giving your word a little too freely, Dickie? It seems to be getting you into trouble," Lawrence responded, his eyes twinkling. "It isn't necessary in this case, old man. I, as your friend, would believe you, even if I wasn't, as your lawyer, officially supposed to do so. Why don't you own up to the poker game, tell your wife who you played with, and get them to substantiate the truth of your story?"

"And have her bleating to all their wives and get them into trouble, too! They're all in the same position I am."

"Well, then, the fact that you can't prove an alibi makes it all the more imperative that we discover the writer of this letter and force a retraction or at least an explanation. Of course, I can't promise anything, but, as I said, I'll do the best I can for you."

"I knew you would. Lord! What a morning I've had," Dickie frankly mopped his forehead, then whipping a check-book from his pocket he reached to the desk for a pen. "Now let's get down to business. I believe fifty dollars is the customary retaining fee, isn't it?"

"Oh, that's not at all necessary between us, old man," Lawrence began. "I told you I'd see you through* this if I could, and I will. Of course, if there are any incidental expenses, we can fix all that up later, after we have a retraction from the writer of this letter—"

"No, you don't," Dickie retorted. "Business is business. If you don't take this check, I'll go to town, give it to dad's attorney, and put the case in his hands. Of course he'll tell the old man, and dad will side with Nannie, and say it serves me jolly well right for getting caught. I'd give five hundred dollars to find out who

perpetrated this outrage. I don't want you to take this case as a friend, Irvin, but as a lawyer."

"If you feel that way, I'll accept it on your own terms, but, of course, I can't guarantee success. Miss Dial, will you please make out a receipt for Mr. Draper? There is one condition, though, Dickie. You must do exactly what I say, and do it blindly, even if it seems against your better judgment."

"I will do anything, everything, to find out the truth!"

"Good. Now go straight down to the post-office, inquire for the package left there for you, and find out, if you can do it in a casual way, who left it there for you."

"I won't be ten minutes." Dickie Draper snatched his hat from the desk and started with alacrity toward the door, as if glad of any action to relieve his mental strain. On the threshold he paused.

"What will I do with the beastly thing after I get it? I can't take it home. If Nannie found it in my possession there'd be the deuce to pay all over again."

"Certainly not. Bring it back here to me, and we'll start our investigation by trying to locate its owner. And for Heaven's sake, don't look so sheepish and guilty, or Llewellyn Jones will be sure to suspect that something is up."

As the sound of his feet receded, Lawrence turned, and grasping his secretary's hand, shook it impulsively.

"It's a case!" he cried. "A case, at last, and if it hadn't been for you I would have let it slip through my fingers. By Jove, I'm going to solve it if I have to hire some one to confess they wrote that blooming letter!"

CHAPTER II.

THE EVIDENCE IN THE CASE.

THE ten minutes had scarcely elapsed when Dickie Draper bounded up the stairs to the lawyer's office once more, a small, neatly wrapped brown-pa-

per parcel held in his extended fingers as if it burned him.

"Who do you think left this at the post-office for me?" he demanded. "That shiftless, good-for-nothing negro, Wellington Locust."

"Locust? Then somebody paid him for it, and paid him well not to talk afterward!" remarked Lawrence. "I defended him once on a charge of chicken stealing, and he'll do anything for me. I'll interview him later. Let us have a look at your prize-package first."

He opened the parcel, and a long, shimmering veil of pale-blue chiffon rippled to the floor. The two men gazed helplessly at the dainty feminine thing; but Miss Dial, reaching forward, gathered it up and examined it.

"Do you think it was purchased here in Lymebrook?" asked the lawyer.

"It isn't likely. Only one or two shops carry motor veils, and they are not of such an expensive grade as this."

"Can you recall any one of the Country Club crowd wearing a veil like that?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, dozens of them. The Berkeley twins, and Mrs. Oliver, and Gladys Carter, and Janet Skidmore, and ever so many more."

"My wife has one also," Dickie remarked. "Oh, I forgot to tell you; what do you think—she did open and read that letter and then resealed it before I came home, for she went down to the post-office this morning and asked for that package, but the postmaster wouldn't give it to her. He told her his instructions had been to deliver it to me personally. You can imagine how much pleasanter that's going to make it for me."

The lawyer rose.

"Miss Dial, would you mind wrapping that veil up for me? I don't want to crush it."

"What are you going to do?" His client looked at him somewhat apprehensively.

"I am going straight up to your house, show this veil to your wife, talk the whole

matter over with her like two sensible people, and get her to help us. If I can convince her that you are innocent, and are acting in a straightforward, manly way about the whole thing, half the battle will be won."

Dickie shook his head dolefully.

"You can't talk with her like a sensible person, and you'll never be able to convince her in this world! I shouldn't like to be there when you open the parcel and wave that veil before her."

"Are you coming?" Lawrence turned to him from the doorway.

"Not I! I'm going out to the Country Club and barricade myself behind a roll of nice, tall, frosty glasses with mint in them until you telephone me that the siege is raised."

The towering maples on the avenue cast a grateful shade from the glare of the hot, noon-day sun, and Irvin Lawrence, as he hastened upon his self-imposed errand, removed his hat. It seemed all at once to have shrunk and confined his brain.

He had a case at last, a real case! When he had brought it to a successful conclusion—and no doubt entered his mind on that score—who could foretell what larger and more important ones would follow? In his buoyant confidence the coming interview held no terrors for him. He would cheerfully have faced a dozen irate and resentful wives, with that fifty-dollar retaining-fee resting comfortably in his breast-pocket.

So intent was he upon his cogitations that he failed to hear his name called out in cheerful accents, until a small car, aggressive in its glistening new paint, drew up with a snort and a rattle at the curb, and Morton Leahy's red head and grinning, freckled countenance obtruded itself upon his consciousness.

"Hello, there, Lawrence! Whither away so fast? Not on a case, are you?" he paused, in an impudent simulation of astonishment, and then added: "Don't tell me one of my cars has been exceeding the speed limit again! Want a lift?"

Lawrence declined with the best grace he could muster, and morosely watched the little car as it chugged off in a self-important whirl of dust. His passive antipathy for the brisk, energetic young salesman, with his easy self-assurance, had developed into a positive animosity. He realized all at once that the man's manner, neckties, personality, and occupation were alike obnoxious to him, and his social success, especially with the ladies, was a source of pained wonderment.

What Katherine Dial, for instance, could see in him—

He roused himself with a start from this fresh train of thought, to find himself at the Drapers' gate. Usually cheerful, with hospitably opened doors and windows, and tea-things on the veranda, it now looked blank and forbidding, the shades somberly drawn as if a funeral had taken place. Even the maid who admitted him wore a subdued expression.

"Mrs. Draper?" she repeated, when he had voiced his inquiry. "I will tell her you are here, but I don't think she'll be able to see you, sir. She isn't very well."

"I am sorry. Please tell her that I will only detain her a few moments. I have brought something for her."

Waiting in the dim, cool drawing-room, he heard the quick exclamation which greeted the delivery of his message. There was a somewhat lengthy pause, a rustle on the stairs, and Nannie Draper stood before him.

Whatever slight impression she had hitherto made upon Lawrence had been that of a fluffy, doll-like person with round, china-blue eyes and the purring grace of a kitten. Now the eyes were narrowed, and gleamed like points of steel between their reddened lids, and the kitten claws seemed barely sheathed as she held out a feverish little hand to him.

"How do you do, Mr. Lawrence?" she murmured. "I have a frightful headache. I would have asked you to excuse me, but Jane said there was something important about which you wished to see me."

He reiterated his regret, and reached into his coat pocket.

"I came, Mrs. Draper, to give you this."

Her eyes widened, and she retreated a step or two.

"What is it? I don't understand—"

For answer, Lawrence held out the small package to her, but after a moment, as she made no move to take it, he slowly unwrapped it and displayed the filmy veil.

"This is yours, isn't it?" he asked gravely.

"Certainly not! I never saw it before. What made you think—"

Her foot was tapping the floor dangerously and two little red spots appeared in her cheeks.

"You inquired for it at the post-office this morning. Through a misapprehension on the part of the postmaster, it was withheld from you, but your husband—"

"Oh, this is insufferable!" Her voice was firm, but angry tears arose in her eyes, and blurred their hardness. "I should like to know how you found that out, and what interest you have in this matter, anyway!"

"Your husband has consulted me—"

The tapping foot came down with a stamp upon the floor.

"What? Dickie has done that! He has been discussing our affairs with you?"

"He has retained me to investigate this matter thoroughly; to find out the owner of the veil and the identity of the anonymous letter-writer. Naturally he put all the facts in his possession at my disposal."

"Are you sure?" she asked, with a scornful curl of her lips.

"Absolutely. Dickie is as innocent in this affair as I am. Mrs. Draper, won't you believe him, and me, and help us to get at the truth?"

"Believe him?" Nannie Draper repeated. "Which of his stories would you advise me to believe, Mr. Lawrence? He has told several. Of course, you would take his word for anything—or pretend

to! Men always stand by each other. But to try to persuade me that he doesn't know the owner of that veil is an insult to my intelligence. As to the letter, I have no doubt that it was an unpleasant surprise."

"Naturally," Irvin Lawrence looked straight into her wavering eyes. "Just as it must have been to you when you read it for the first time."

"The first time!" she faltered.

"When you steamed the envelope open and then resealed it before your husband's return this morning."

"Mr. Lawrence! Did my husband send you here to insult me with such an accusation? I—I never did any—"

"Then how did you know that a package had been left at the post-office for your husband? You went there and tried to get it, you know, before you opened the letter in Dick's presence."

Nannie Draper's eyes opened wide, and two tears which had been trembling on her lashes rolled down her cheeks.

"O-oh, did he know that?"

"They told him so at the post-office."

"To think of his asking them—questioning that horrid, gossipy old Llewellyn Jones about me!"

"I'm sure he didn't," Mrs. Draper. Jones volunteered the information."

"Of course he would! And now it'll be all over town, I suppose."

"Well, it won't matter so very much, will it?" There was a hidden twinkle in the lawyer's eyes, but his tone was sedulously grave. "It will only anticipate things, won't it? I understood from your husband that you had decided to go away."

"I don't know," Mrs. Draper wailed miserably. "I don't know what to do. I wish I were dead! I almost wish I hadn't seen that hateful letter at all. Now I can never trust Dickie again, never!"

"Don't say that. I am convinced that some mistake has been made about that veil, but I mean to discover the writer of that letter and demand a retraction."

"Well, if Dickie wasn't motoring with

some woman Sunday night, why doesn't he tell me the truth about where he was?"

"Are you sure he hasn't?" Lawrence asked warily.

"You know he hasn't. He couldn't have been in three places at once, and besides, I disproved one of his stories already."

"Perhaps he feels that you wouldn't believe him anyway. Are you sure the car was out that night, Mrs. Draper?"

"Of course. It was all mud the next morning, and it had been cleaned only the day before. But that has nothing to do with it—I mean, if Dickie hadn't been in our car, he might have used another. Nearly every one in town has a Paragon. Of course, the fact that our car was out is only—corroborative evidence, I think you call it. The main thing is that Dickie won't tell me where he was, and he won't because he can't."

"Then you only want to find the owner of this veil?" Lawrence suggested craftily, seeking to lead her away from the dangerous topic. "You don't care at all who wrote this letter?"

"Of course I do! It humiliates me to think that any one else saw my husband and that other woman—" She sobbed afresh. "I never believed it of Dickie! I can't endure it! I'm going straight to my great-aunt in Philadelphia!"

"And thereby give verisimilitude to any idle rumors which may get about, Mrs. Draper? I am sure you will think better of it. Perhaps that veil was never lost at all. Perhaps it was merely placed in the post-office and the letter sent to make trouble. The very fact that no name was signed shows that the writer was merely attempting to insinuate something which could not be substantiated."

"Then why won't he tell me?" began Mrs. Draper again, but Lawrence cut her short.

"The letter itself—did you notice anything peculiar about it? Anything which might lead you to suspect the identity of the writer?"

"No, I scarcely noticed it. What I

read was so awful—it fairly stunned me. I don't even remember what the writing was like."

"Would you mind very much if I asked you to look at it again? I have it here. I don't want you to try to think who might or might not have had a motive in writing it. I mean"—as she looked up quickly—"any one who might possibly want to make trouble between you and your husband. Just examine it closely and tell me if the writing reminds you of that of any one you know."

She took the letter from him, holding it disdainfully, with the tips of her fingers. Her lips quivered childishly as she read it once more.

"Never mind the words," Lawrence counseled soothingly. "Just the writing itself. Does it—" he paused as she glanced up startled into his face.

"It looks like—O-oh, but I really shouldn't say, should I? It would seem almost like an accusation, and I haven't a shadow of proof. Besides, although I'm not very fond of her, I don't believe she would do such a thing as this."

"We are accusing no one, we're only trying to get at the truth," Lawrence said eagerly. "Please say what you were going to, Mrs. Draper?"

"One of the girls in our own set writes very much like that. At least, she crosses her 't's' with that affected downward slant, and puts her capitals away off from the rest of the word. All in all, the writing seems to resemble hers, but I can't be sure."

"Who is it?"

"That widow, Mrs. Oliver." The name came almost in a whisper from her lips. "Please, Mr. Lawrence, don't say a word of this to any one. I can't believe that Marion Oliver would want to make trouble between Dickie and me, yet she can be dreadfully catty, especially when she loses at bridge, or some nice new man joins the club, and one of the younger girls sees him first.

"Oh, do you suppose she's tried to flirt with my Dickie, and he wouldn't notice

her, and she's done this out of sheer revenge? We don't know anything about her, really, you know. She's only been here a little over a year. If she sent that hateful letter to him—"

"Now, Mrs. Draper, we mustn't jump to conclusions."

"But now that I think of it, I've seen her *look* at him—why, she scarcely takes her eyes off him! And she's always tagging him around the golf course. She's been such an inveterate flirt ever since she came that I never gave it a thought. The deceitful little cat! I suppose she's laughing in her sleeve now at us both!"

"Whoever wrote that letter could scarcely be doing that, Mrs. Draper. They evidently only wanted to make trouble for your husband. It couldn't have been anticipated that you would open his mail."

She hung her head at the implied rebuke, then raised it again sharply.

"If I hadn't, Dickie would have claimed the veil at the post-office, and I shouldn't have known anything about it. He would never have dared tell me. Oh, if I only knew where he was Sunday night!"

"Mrs. Draper, have you any letters from Mrs. Oliver, with which I could compare this?"

"Yes, I believe I have. There must be one or two in that desk drawer there, invitations or acceptances or something. I'll see."

She crossed the room lightly, rummaged for a moment or two, and then returned with a handful of envelopes which she spread out upon the table top.

"Here's one of hers, and here and here. There, you see how she crosses her 't's.' Doesn't the writing look almost the same as in that letter?"

"Yes, it does somewhat," Lawrence admitted. "But we'll have to be careful, you know, until the identification is sure. If you'll allow me, I will take this note of Mrs. Oliver's and examine it further. Please remember that we have no cause to suspect her save what may prove to

be a chance similarity between her writing and that of the author of this anonymous letter. Until we are sure whether she personally is concerned in this matter or not, it would be unfair to judge her. And now I must go. Don't distress yourself unnecessarily over this thing at all, Mrs. Draper. It may yet prove to be nothing more than an ill-timed practical joke, you know."

"Then why?"—she began again—"why doesn't Dickie tell me the truth about where he was Sunday night?"

And with that unanswerable refrain ringing in his ears Irvin Lawrence took his leave.

His interview with young Mrs. Draper had thrown no further light on the mystery. Her swiftly aroused suspicion of Mrs. Oliver, based as it was upon her own instinctive antipathy as much as upon the similarity in handwriting, was of negligible value. Lawrence knew Marion Oliver, and liked her as a good all-round sportswoman and pal, but he readily conceded that her attractions might work mischievous havoc in the mind of a wife whose jealousy was aroused.

The connecting link with the anonymous letter-writer was clearly the negro who had left the veil at the post-office. He must locate his erstwhile client, Wellington Locust, and cajole him into telling what he knew.

As Lawrence passed the Berkeleys he heard the whirring drone of a lawn-mower, and glancing over the low, closely-clipped hedge, to his astonishment he beheld the object of his thoughts.

"Hello, Wellington! What on earth are you doing with that lawn-mower?"

The negro looked up, grinned sheepishly, and tilting his battered hat back from his moist brown forehead, shambled over to the hedge.

"Workin', Mister Lawrence," he responded, adding naively. "Lucy, she cayn't do no washin' dis week. Done gone an' run a rusty nail in her han'."

"So you're doing odd jobs, eh? Cut-

ting grass and running errands? You must be making money."

Wellington shook his head energetically.

"Not real money, suh. Jest a little change."

"But the lady must have paid you well last night for taking that package to the post-office," the lawyer remarked carelessly.

Wellington rolled his eyes.

"Lady?" he repeated. "I ain't cyarry no package—"

"Oh, come now, Wellington, think again. How much did she give you not to say anything about it?" His hand went tentatively to his pocket, and the negro's eyes followed it.

He hesitated, then sighed and shook his head again.

"Somebody," he observed, as if to himself, "sho' is barkin' up de wrong tree. I ain't seen no lady, an' I ain't been nigh to dat pos'-office—"

"Llewellyn Jones says you brought that package to him, and told him it was to be delivered only to young Mr. Draper."

"He say dat?" Wellington snorted. "Whar he git dat notion? He done contaminated me wid some yuther nigger. Dat's what come o' puttin' po' white trash in gov'mint positions! He's liable fo' ter stir up some trubble fo' hisse'f!"

The lawyer's hand came away from his pocket with something crackling suggestively in his palm. Wellington's eyes bulged with the effort to descry the denomination of the bill, or at least the color of its back. When no hint of yellow rewarded his gaze, he made as if to turn away.

Lawrence cleared his throat impressively.

"Wellington." His voice was solemn and grim with portent. "Do you know what was in that package?"

"Me? No, suh!" The negro shifted uneasily beneath the suddenly austere gaze bent upon him. "Ain't nothin' wrong 'bout dat ar package, is dere?"

"Enough wrong to get you in more trouble than you've ever been in if you don't come across."

"Come whar?" Wellington's normal hue began slowly to fade.

"If you don't tell me who gave you that package, and all about it, you're liable to go to jail again, and this time I won't be able to get you off so easily as I did when you stole those chickens!"

"I ain't steal no chickens, Mister Lawrence! Yo' done got up in co'te an' say so, yo' own se'f!" Pained reproach filled his tones. "I don't know nothin' 'bout no package. I ain't fixin' ter git in no white folks' mix-ups, I got my own worrymints."

"All right." The lawyer's hand went toward his pocket again. "Only, when the sheriff comes after you, don't expect any help from me. Remember you refused—"

"Jest a minute, boss, please, suh! I ain't refusin'! I'm on'y studyin' 'bout what I 'bleeged ter do. Here I is 'twixt de hawk an' de buzzard! Lady, she gimme some money fo' ter leave dat ar package at de pos'-office an' keep my mouf shet, an' I done keep it shet. Now yo' come 'long an'—an' axes me ter open it." He grinned expansively. "I reckon it's open!"

The bill changed hands, but as he stuffed it into his pocket, anxiety descended upon him once more.

"Say, yo' sho' is gwine he'p me out o' dis ruction, Mister Lawrence, suh?"

"If you tell me the truth. Who gave you that package?"

"I don't know. Ef I was ter drap daid dis minute I couldn't tell yo'! I was goin' long der Hill road 'bout nine o'clock, jist mindin' my own business—an' goin' kinder hasty like, ca'se it's de dark o' de moon, an' I wasn't far from de Pres'terium chu'chyard—w'en I yeres some one comin' behime me.

"I didn't was'e no time lookin' 'roun', I jest kep' goin'. Bimeby somebody calls out, an' it was a woman's voice, an' I slowed down. She come 'long up ter me.

"'Yo' goin' by de pos'-office?' she says. I say: 'No'm, I wasn't fixin' to, but I kin.' Den she gimme a dollar, an' de package, an' tol' me jest like you say; ter take dat package to Llewellyn Jones an' tell him young Mr. Draper would call fo' it, dat it wasn't ter be give ter nobody else.

"So I done it. De pos'-office was closed, but I went 'roun' and knocked on de house do', an' Miss Maggie, she took it. Dat's all I knows, an' if I was ter drap—"

"You didn't recognize the lady?"

"No, suh. It was dark, like I said, an' besides I wasn't payin' partic'lar notice; I was only studyin' 'bout arrivin' away from dat chu'chyard. I thought like as not it was one o' de nurses from Dr. Renshaw's san'torium on de Hill."

"You can't remember anything in particular about her, Wellington? Think! Her voice or her walk—"

"Yas-suh! It come to my min' now dat it 'peared ter me she limped, like, an' her voice was sof' an' kinder drawled."

The mysterious woman was lame!

Almost against his will, the lawyer recalled that only a few days before, the widow, Marion Oliver, had painfully twisted her ankle on the golf links, and limped in consequence!

Was it a mere coincidence, or could it be that the coils of circumstantial evidence were tightening to encircle her? Could she have an object, other than the one jealously attributed to her by young Mrs. Draper, in trying to establish the fact of Dickie's presence on the turnpike that night?

CHAPTER III.

THE VOICE ON THE WIRE.

THE Country Club, squat and bulbous and creamy white, lay like a huge mushroom on the soft, rolling green of the golf-links. In anticipation of the approaching tournament, a gaily striped marquee had been erected on the

lawn, and the smartly arrayed groups about the luncheon tables on the veranda formed bright blotches of color in the vernal setting.

"Hello, Dickie! All alone?" A rotund little man paused to ask superfluously of a solitary individual who sat gazing dejectedly at a wilted green sprig in his glass.

Dickie Draper glanced up, his scowl momentarily banished.

"'Lo, Middlemarch. Sit down and have one. Not going in for this confounded tournament, are you?"

"Lord, no. Don't play often enough to keep in form. How d'you manage to get away from the office?"

"Oh, I'm taking a day off."

"Celebrating something?" Middlemarch's pudgy fingers encircled his glass and he raised it tentatively.

"Celebrating—yah!" Dickie snarled, and then confessed miserably: "I'm in the dumps, Middlemarch."

"What hit you?" The little man's mild eyes rounded. "Not the market? I warned you, my boy, to let war stocks alone—"

"Market nothing! I've had a deuce of a row with my wife."

"That's bad." John Middlemarch shook his head with an air of weary sophistication. "But don't worry. No matter who started it, just take a firm stand and she'll come around all right."

"Not she! I've explained till I'm blue in the face—"

"Ah, my boy, never explain; never even admit the necessity for an explanation!"

"But Nannie thinks I've lied to her. Um—er—I have, although it's not as serious as she imagines. I knew she wouldn't listen to reason, and so—"

"What woman does? Dignified silence is your cue, my dear Dickie. Never let 'em get away with anything if you value your future peace. Henrietta trusts me implicitly. And why? Because"—he added complacently—"I haven't lived with her for nearly a quarter of a century

without learning how to manage her. I can flatter myself that I am master in my own household."

"Oh, it's all very well for you to talk, but you've never been up against such a proposition as this. What would you do, Middlemarch, if your wife asked you where you were Sunday night?"

"What-t!" The other man's round, ruddy face paled and seemed all at once to sag like a pricked balloon, and he pushed his chair back until it tilted. "How do you—what the deuce do you mean?"

"Suppose, for reasons of your own, it wasn't convenient for you to tell her the truth, so you lied, and she found you out?" went on Dickie, gloomily immersed in his own thoughts and unconscious of the impression he had made. "Dignified silence wouldn't help you any, and explanations only make it worse."

"Do you mean that you—you went out on an affair of your own Sunday evening, and now you're in trouble with your wife about it?" Middlemarch gasped.

"It wasn't any 'affair,' but I've been accused of being where I wasn't, and I can't prove the difference. I'd like to know what you'd do in a case like that?"

"The Lord only knows!" John Middlemarch's tone was more fervent than the mere supposition seemed to warrant. "Henrietta is not a suspicious woman, I'll say that for her, but I don't take any chances. Of course, your affairs are your own, Dickie, but it looks as if you'd got yourself in rather a hole. And last Sunday, too! Of all the—"

"If that's all the consolation you can give me, to sit there chuckling about it!" retorted Dickie indignantly. "I don't see anything so beastly funny!"

"Of course you don't, my boy. I was just thinking— Hello, here's Lawrence."

Dickie looked up in anxious anticipation as the lawyer joined them, and a significant look passed between the two men.

"Sorry if I'm late, Middlemarch. I can only stop for a quick bite; no tournament for me," he said briskly. "Work turned up at the office at the last minute, and I've got to get back. By the way, do you know anything about that sanatorium up on the Hill?"

The question brought a prescient gleam of interest to the younger man's eye, but Middlemarch replied carelessly:

"Dr. Coleman Renshaw's? Oh, it's just an exclusive, high-priced rest cure for nervous patients—mostly society women with imaginary ailments. Why?"

"But Dr. Renshaw is known as a specialist in diseases of the brain, too, isn't he?" asked Dickie eagerly. "It's common talk that some of his patients are little better than lunatics. By George, Lawrence, do you suppose—"

"That any of them are dangerous?" laughed the lawyer, for he saw that Middlemarch was eying them curiously. "No, I asked because a relative of mine is looking for just such an establishment. I think I'll recommend it, but I'll interview this Dr. Renshaw first. Now for lunch."

In mid-afternoon Nannie Draper came to a decision. She had not been wholly satisfied with the result of her conference with Irvin Lawrence.

Socially he had his uses; he was undeniably good-looking and well bred, a splendid dancer, consistent bridge-player, and a dependable man to take an engaged girl in to dinner and keep her from mooning across the table at her fiancé; but as a lawyer he was a negligible quantity.

She felt an overpowering need of a feminine confidante, one who was not young enough to rejoice cattishly in her dilemma, or old enough to smother her with sympathy and condemn Dickie unheard.

She mentally reviewed her friends, and concluded that Mrs. Middlemarch would be safest, because she was motherly and warm-hearted and her advice would be sound.

Nannie bathed her reddened eyes, tied on a broad-brimmed, shady garden-hat, and sallied forth.

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemarch, rising from her low chair as the girl came up the veranda-steps. "I'm so glad you— Oh, whatever is the matter?"

"I—I have a headache," Nannie responded faintly, sinking into a chair and pressing her hands to her throbbing temples. "My head feels as if it would burst and I've cried until I can't squeeze out another tear."

"Cried? Why, Nannie, what is it? What's troubling you?"

Two motherly arms enfolded her, and as Nannie's head drooped upon a capacious bosom she belied her last remark by bursting into copious tears.

Mrs. Middlemarch wisely let her cry until the convulsive sobs had changed to fluttering, quickly drawn sighs; then she gently repeated her question.

"It's D-Dickie! A letter came for him from some woman who wouldn't sign her name, and I read it, and it was about a blue veil, and they wouldn't give it to me, and Dickie has been out motoring with another woman, and I wish I were dead!"

"Good Heavens, child! What are you talking about?" Mrs. Middlemarch fairly shook her in her impatience. "What would any one write your husband about a blue veil for, and who was he motoring with?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"But, Nannie, won't Dickie tell you?"

"He's told me too much. When I f-faced him with what that letter said about him, he gave three different excuses, and they were all of them fibs!"

"This is terrible! And you say you discovered it through an anonymous letter? My dear, you should pay no attention to it! Put it out of your thoughts. No one ought to be able to destroy your faith in Dickie or disturb your serenity of mind."

"I don't believe you ever read a letter

intended for your husband, which insinuated—which even seemed to take it for granted that he was trotting about with another woman.”

“Heaven forbid! John would never be guilty of such a thing, and besides I don’t read my husband’s mail!”

“But Dickie gave me permission to read it,” Nannie began in shame; and then the habit of candor reasserted itself. “He didn’t know what was in it, though, and I did. I had opened it before he came home.”

“Nannie!”

“Well, I did, and I’m glad of it! It was addressed in a woman’s handwriting! If I hadn’t read the letter, I should never have known about the blue veil or the motor trip, or anything, and I would’ve gone on believing in Dickie until everybody else in town knew and either laughed at me or pitied me. I don’t know which would be worse.”

“It isn’t true! I don’t believe a word of it, Nannie, and I’m ashamed of you for harboring such a thought. Dickie is head over heels in love with you, my dear, and always has been. He never even looked at another girl after you came back from boarding-school.”

“No one with an atom of character pays any attention to an anonymous communication; they are only sent by unprincipled people who daren’t come forward openly and make a direct accusation. I would as readily believe that John would take another woman motor-ing clandestinely as that Dickie would.”

“Then why did he lie to me about Sunday night—yes, lie? There must be some truth in the story, or he wouldn’t have acted so guilty. O-oh, it’s awful to trust somebody and believe every word they say, and then find it isn’t so at all!”

“My dear, when you’ve been married twenty-three years instead of three—”

“Mrs. Middlemarch! Did you ever catch your husband in a—a fib?”

Mrs. Middlemarch smiled somewhat grimly.

“Whenever he tried to tell one. They were perfectly innocent, of course, just about trivial things of which he thought I wouldn’t approve. But the point is that I always did catch him, you see, and now I have quite discouraged him from any attempt at prevarication. All husbands tell little, needless fibs, you know; it really doesn’t do to attach any importance to them. Don’t believe one word of that stupid letter.”

“But how about the veil—that’s proof enough, isn’t it?”

“Let me see, you did say something about a veil. It was mentioned in the letter, wasn’t it? How do you know that such an article is really concerned in this affair of Dickie’s?”

“Because I have it. Here it is!”

Nannie drew the tightly rolled wad of chiffon from her hand-bag and shook it out before the older woman’s half-incredulous eyes.

“Nannie, where did you get it?”

“Mr. Lawrence brought it to me this morning.”

“Mr. Lawrence, the lawyer, you mean? What on earth does he know about this? And how did the veil come into his possession?”

“Well, you see, when I threatened to go out to Aunt Susan’s and get a divorce—”

“Nannie, you didn’t!”

“Yes, and I meant it! Dickie went down to Mr. Lawrence’s office and asked him to investigate the whole affair. He gave him the veil—”

“But I don’t understand at all. Nannie, you had best start at the very beginning and tell me everything.”

Nannie complied. Mrs. Middlemarch listened in silence while the younger woman told her story. When it was finished she shook her head.

“My dear, I scarcely know what to say to you. Don’t you think you are imagining a great deal—”

“Oh, am I?” Nannie’s overwrought nerves gave way. “I suppose that horrid note wasn’t real, when it was stamped

and postmarked and sent through the mails!"

"Nannie, you don't understand—"

"I understand that my husband has been deceiving me! That he has been out motoring with the woman who wore—this thing, and then lied to me about it! I know that my heart is broken, and that's all I care to understand! I don't believe you would think it was imagination if anybody came to you with such a story!"

"It is unthinkable that he would ever—I mean that such an insinuation would be made about my husband; but if it were, I should rise above it. I should—"

"Telephone, please, ma'am." The maid stood in the doorway.

"Who is it, Nora?" Mrs. Middlemarch rose.

"I don't know, ma'am. A lady wants to speak to you. She didn't give her name."

"Excuse me, my dear; I won't be a moment. It's probably Mrs. Berkeley. I promised to help her with her list for the new bridge series. Nora, how many times must I tell you to ask the name—"

Her voice dwindled away in the recesses of the hall, and Nannie sat listlessly crumpling the blue veil in her nervous hands. Then she set her teeth, and with a swift, impetuous effort rent the delicate fabric throughout its length and flung the torn wisps upon the veranda floor.

Springing to her feet, she paced back and forth as if inaction were no longer endurable. All at once a sound, an exclamation of shocked amazement from within the house, made her pause. Without consciousness of eavesdropping, she stood immovable, listening, and as she did so her face slowly blanched.

After a moment, as if without her own volition, she stole silently to the door, across the threshold, and down the hall to the newel-post at the foot of the stairs. There she waited, straining her eyes and ears toward the library, from whence came Mrs. Middlemarch's voice.

"My husband! Sunday night? His companion! I beg your pardon? May I inquire who you are and why you have presumed to telephone me? I should like to know to whom I am speaking—"

Then the click of the receiver on its hook. In another moment Mrs. Middlemarch, reeling as if from a blow, appeared in the doorway. Her face was colorless and drawn, her eyes staring wildly.

"What is it?" Nannie Draper whispered. "I heard a little—I couldn't help it. What has happened?"

"My husband!" Mrs. Middlemarch responded dully, as if unable to grasp the significance of her own words. "My husband, too! He was seen out motoring Sunday evening with another woman! Good Heavens, Nannie!"

Her voice rose in a frightened cry, and she sprang forward. Nannie Draper, after a wavering step or two, had fallen face downward in a soft little heap upon the floor.

"Well, upon my word," drawled a sweet, somewhat languid voice from the veranda. "Is anything the matter?"

Mrs. Middlemarch on her knees beside the younger woman glanced up swiftly.

"Oh, Mrs. Oliver, come in, do! Nannie Draper has fainted. Would you mind ringing for my maid?"

Marion Oliver came quickly forward. She was a tall, slender woman, of indeterminate age, and she moved in spite of a perceptible limp with a sinuous, cat-like grace.

"I'm so sorry," she purred. "What can have caused it? The heat, I suppose. But, no, her hands are like ice. Let me help you, Mrs. Middlemarch. I think we can arrange to carry her to the couch."

Between them they lifted the limp figure and placed it on the davenport. Nora brought restoratives, and after five interminable minutes Nannie Draper opened her eyes.

Her gaze fell upon Marion Oliver and then wandered in a bewildered fashion to

Mrs. Middlemarch's distracted face, and all at once she laughed.

"Dickie isn't the only one, is he?" she gasped, her voice rising deliriously. "Oh, it's too funny! First my husband and then yours—"

"Hush, dear, do hush! You don't know what you're saying!" Mrs. Middlemarch pressed her hand convulsively with warning glances toward Marion Oliver's impassive face. "Try to control yourself!"

Nannie, shaking with uncontrollable hysteria, followed the older woman's eyes with her own, and as they rested again upon the newcomer's face a partial realization of her self-betrayal came to her. Choking back the sobbing laughter which pulsed in her throat, she waited until she could trust her voice and then asked faintly:

"What is it? What happened? How—how did I get here?"

"You fainted, dear, from the heat. Don't you remember?" The same repressed note of admonition sounded through her hostess's tones. "Don't you remember you weren't feeling well, and I brought you in here to lie down, but you fell before I could get you to the couch? Fortunately, Mrs. Oliver came just then and helped me."

"Oh, yes, I— It seems to come back to me now. I'm sorry to have been such a trouble."

"You weren't, my dear. I only hope that you will not suffer any ill effects from your fall."

"My head is splitting, but then I told you it was when I came, you know. I think I had best go home now and straight to bed. I really feel quite ill."

"But, Nannie, do you feel able to walk? Had I not better telephone for Dickie? I would send you home in our car, but"—and involuntarily her lips tightened—"it's out of order."

"Oh, I shall be quite all right. I have such a short distance to go. Perhaps—" Nannie turned with a faint, questioning smile to Mrs. Oliver.

"Of course, I'll go home with you, dear, and put you to bed and take care of you until your husband returns from his office," Mrs. Oliver responded to the unspoken appeal. "One shouldn't overdo in this weather. You're looking quite yourself again now. Let me help you."

"You'll telephone later and let me know how you are, won't you?" Mrs. Middlemarch urged solicitously as Nannie, leaning upon the other woman's arm, walked waveringly toward the door. "I'll run in surely to-morrow. If I were you, I would keep just as quiet as I could."

"Oh, I will." Nannie grasped the double significance in her friend's words and responded to it. "Don't be worried, dear Mrs. Middlemarch, about me."

"Oh, see, you must have dropped your veil." Mrs. Oliver stopped suddenly. At her feet lay the twisted remnants of blue chiffon. "Why, it's torn!"

"Yes," lied Nannie hastily. "I caught it in the gate."

Mrs. Oliver stopped and picked it up, smothering an ejaculation of surprise as she did so. She turned to the girl.

"This—this is yours, isn't it?" she stammered. "I mean, you couldn't have picked it up by mistake for yours at the club or somewhere, could you?"

"Certainly it's mine," responded Nannie emphatically, but she dared not raise her eyes to either of the two women. With a conscious little laugh she added: "Why did you ask me that, Mrs. Oliver?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, at the first glance I thought I recognized it as the property of another friend of mine." For once the widow's cool serenity seemed jarred. "Hers is the exact shade of this, but one blue veil is very much like another, isn't it?"

Late that afternoon Irvin Lawrence was deep in a discussion of the recent events with his secretary when the office telephone rang.

Katherine Dial picked up the receiver. "Hello! Yes, this is Mr. Lawrence's

office. Who is it, please? Just a moment, Mrs. Middlemarch."

"What on earth—keeping tabs on John, I suppose," Lawrence muttered as he took the receiver from Miss Dial.

"Hello! Yes. Good afternoon, Mrs. Middlemarch. John isn't—oh, you don't! What? Consult me? John didn't say anything about it. I lunched with him at the Country Club. Oh, I see. Not now, but I can be with you in an hour. I beg pardon; what was that you said? Great Heavens! Yes, in an hour, Mrs. Middlemarch."

He hung up the receiver slowly and turned with staring eyes to meet Miss Dial's questioning ones.

"She—she's had a mysterious telephone message, she doesn't know who from, about her husband. Good Lord, what's happened to this town?"

CHAPTER IV.

COMPLICATIONS.

THE way to the Middlemarch house lay past the church and rectory. As Lawrence approached the latter he heard his name called in subdued but rounded pulpit tones, and, looking up, he beheld the thin, ascetic face of Dr. Skidmore, framed in its scanty gray locks, peering out at him from the vines of the veranda.

"Come into my study, Mr. Lawrence," the minister urged as he grasped the younger man's hand in a clammy grip. "My wife is out, and we shall be undisturbed there. I want to consult you on a matter of the utmost importance, and feel that the very walls have ears!"

With a sinking heart the lawyer followed to the small, book-lined room, where Dr. Skidmore, after carefully closing the door, turned to him, trembling in spite of his forced composure.

"Mr. Lawrence, a monstrous, an almost unbelievable, thing has occurred! I have been made the victim of a most vile and malicious slander!"

"Indeed, doctor! In just what form was this attack made upon you?"

"By means of a scurrilous anonymous letter. Read this and tell me what redress I have."

He produced a large folded sheet of commercial paper, and Lawrence read in a scrawling hand:

REVEREND DOCTOR SKIDMORE:

I beg to call your attention to one of the commandments, which you so sternly admonish your parishioners to observe: the eighth. Why is it that whenever an extra large collection is taken for the church mortgage or repairs, you find yourself enabled to purchase expensive additions to your private library, while the parish debt remains the same as ever, and the roof of the vestry-room still leaks? Practise what you preach. You will find an explanation preferable to an investigation.

ONE OF YOUR CONGREGATION.

"Think of it, sir! After my lifetime of service and devotion to this parish, to be accused of misusing the church funds! I am shocked and grieved beyond measure, but I am not crushed. I mean to find the slanderer and demand a retraction, if I have to denounce him from the very pulpit!"

"H-m!" Lawrence refolded the letter thoughtfully. "I should not take such a public method as that, doctor, at least until you have tried other measures. You know in every congregation there are gossips and backbiters, and such a course as you propose may provoke unpleasant comment and dissension."

The minister shook his head sadly.

"I am only too well aware of the bitter fruit of unjust and unwarranted suspicion in the average human mind," he responded. "That is why I stopped you when you were passing so opportunely just now."

"You wish to put this matter in my hands, doctor?"

"Absolutely. I shall be guided by your advice."

"Then make no move until you hear from me again. I will take this letter with me now and let you know as soon as I have discovered anything. You know this

is a very serious charge, and we must proceed cautiously."

"And—er—in the most private manner possible. I am loath to stir up strife and controversy, and although it grieves me I must admit that there are those among my flock who might give ear to even such a baseless allegation. I have the utmost confidence, Mr. Lawrence, in your discretion, and I trust that you will be able to bring my detractor to account."

Lawrence took leave of the minister, and proceeded on his way to the Middlemarches'.

He felt none of the elation of the morning. The episode of the motor veil and the first anonymous letter, taken by themselves, might have been fairly simple and easy of solution, but in conjunction with the later swiftly crowding events, it assumed grave and complicated proportions.

Some sinister, malign influence was at work to undermine the peace and well-being of the community, and he feared that the three mischief-breeding messages were but forerunners of more audacious charges yet to come.

Mrs. Middlemarch received him lugubriously. She was a large, expansive woman, and at normal times she radiated a bland self-satisfaction of demeanor which her enemies were wont to term pharisaical. Now she looked as if some swift undermining process had been at work. Her massive figure sagged and her high, aristocratic nose was suspiciously bulbous and carmined under its glaze of powder.

"It was good of you to come, Mr. Lawrence." She held out her hand. "Perhaps I should not have sent for you, but I have been very much worried."

"You mentioned something about a telephone call, Mrs. Middlemarch?"

"Yes, it came this afternoon. At first I determined to pay no attention to it, but after thinking the matter over—in fact, I have thought of nothing else since—I came to the conclusion that it was my duty to consult you. Of course, I trust John implicitly, but I must admit that

this message has had a disquieting effect on me."

"Have you told your husband about it?"

"Not yet. He was out this afternoon, when about five o'clock the maid announced that a lady wished to speak to me on the telephone—a lady!" She repeated bitterly. "She began by saying that, of course, I knew where my husband was on Sunday night—"

"Sunday night!" Lawrence repeated, sitting forward suddenly in his chair.

Mrs. Middlemarch nodded.

"Since she took so much for granted I permitted that remark to pass in silence, although I will confess it astonished me. She went on to say she thought we would both want to know that the identity of his companion in the automobile was known. 'His companion!' I repeated. I assure you, Mr. Lawrence, that the words were fairly wrung from me by surprise. 'Yes. If Mr. Middlemarch escorts the lady on another occasion everything will be known, and you will both be subject to unpleasant comment,' she had the effrontery to say to me. I asked whom I was speaking to and she said she preferred to remain incognito, and rang off. What am I to think?"

"You didn't recognize the voice?"

"I did and I didn't, that's the strange part of it. I'm positive it's some one I know very well. The voice was as familiar to me as if I had heard it every day, and yet I can't quite place the young woman, for young she undoubtedly was. I've gone carefully over every one in my mind, every one in our set here in Lymebrook, but I can't be sure. I was really too agitated at the time, and later, to give much thought to the voice itself."

"Naturally, the message annoyed you." The lawyer felt his ground carefully. "But since you know where your husband was on Sunday night—"

"I do not, Mr. Lawrence," she spoke with an obvious effort. "I went to church, of course, and left John reading here in the library. When I returned he had gone

out, but I didn't wait up for him; I don't know when he came home because I was asleep."

"And you did not ask him the next day where he had been?"

Mrs. Middlemarch's face slowly reddened.

"I—I believe he said something about having motored out to call on old Mr. Danforth, that they were planning some business deal together."

"Well, that seems corroborative, doesn't it?"

Her lips tightened.

"This afternoon, when I thought it over, I doubted, seriously, especially when I recalled that our car has been out of order since Friday. I haven't lived with John for twenty-three years without knowing when he's attempting to prevaricate.

"An hour ago I telephoned Mr. Danforth's house; the old gentleman has been out in Michigan, at Mount Clemens, for the past fortnight! Mr. Lawrence, where do you suppose John was—"

"Whew!" the lawyer whistled inaudibly to himself. He began to feel as if he were living in some horrible nightmare. Was every woman in Lymebrook going to ask him where their husbands had been on that fateful Sunday night?

"That is a minor point beside the identity of your telephone caller. If we can find out from the central exchange—"

"'A minor point,' Mr. Lawrence?" his client sniffed.

"Surely you realize it is far more important to silence this mischief-maker? Your husband will undoubtedly tell you the truth if you ask him pointblank, but I should advise you, Mrs. Middlemarch, to say nothing of the telephone message until we have traced it to its source. It is clearly the work of a scandal-monger, and you may not be the only victim in this town whose peace of mind will be assailed. I am speaking on greater authority now than you may imagine."

"I do not imagine, I know. Little Mrs.

Draper was here; she had just finished telling me of her own trouble when the message came for me. She said that her husband had put the anonymous letter affair into your hands, and I thought I had better consult you, too. There's no knowing how far this thing will spread if it's not checked. Of course, this anonymous informant of ours may be actuated by malicious motives, but I hope I am broad-minded enough to admit that she's not wholly to blame."

"But Mrs. Middlemarch—"

"There's no smoke without fire!" quoted the lady firmly. "If Dickie Draper and my husband were both innocent of such compromising behavior as they have been accused of, why did they go out of their way to try to establish false alibis?"

"That, of course, remains to be seen, but I must earnestly caution you not to take any one else into your confidence concerning this telephone message. Nothing travels quicker than idle surmise and gossip, and quite unintentionally some word might reach the very ears of this person and put her on her guard. I warned Mrs. Draper to say nothing to any one, but unfortunately she did not follow my advice."

"Oh, we will all be most careful. On the other hand, although I know that I can rely fully on your discretion, Mr. Lawrence, I trust you won't find it necessary to take your secretary too fully into your confidence, at least concerning this affair of mine."

"Miss Dial?" the lawyer looked up in surprise. "But she attends to all my secretarial work and is as able and conscientious an assistant as I could wish. Surely you do not think that she would be less discreet than I, myself?"

Mrs. Middlemarch raised her eyebrows at the unconscious warmth of his speech, but her manner was unbending.

"My reason is personal. You are a comparative newcomer here, but Katherine Dial has grown up among us. When she was left an orphan and practically pen-

niless, we offered her substantial assistance, but she was headstrong and preferred her independence.

"We are slightly old-fashioned and conservative in Lymebrook, and the fact that a young woman goes out into the world as a bread-winner cannot help but put her definitely on a different social plane. Miss Dial was unable at first to comprehend this and I am afraid she still resents what she must consider as snubs at the hands of some of us, myself included."

"I'm sure Miss Dial has too broad a sense of humor to resent or even heed such an attitude on any one's part," he responded with ill-concealed disgust. "She is a business woman first, last, and all the time, and no petty social snubbing would merit the slightest importance in her eyes. My clients' affairs are merely impersonal cases to her, and in my office she is a well-trained thinking machine. But I'm afraid if little Mrs. Draper spreads the news of your telephone call broadcast we will find it almost impossible to discover the identity of the scandal-monger."

"She doesn't know all the details, of course, but I was so shocked and startled that I told her perhaps more than I should. She was quite upset about it herself—in fact, she fainted."

"Fainted!"

"Yes, and then Mrs. Oliver came and took her home."

The lawyer threw up his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Do any more of your friends know of this matter?" he asked. "One might as well publish it in the paper—"

"Oh, Mrs. Oliver doesn't know anything about it. We threw her off the scent quite cleverly. And I'm sure Nannie won't speak of it. She only told me because John and I stand almost *in loco parentis* to her. She has come to us with all her worries since she was a very young girl. You will do what you can to help me, won't you, Mr. Lawrence? I shall depend on you."

The lawyer promised, but somewhat doubtfully and took his leave. It was

clear to his mind that not only Dickie Draper, but sober, staid John Middlemarch had involved himself in some escapade from which, however innocent, each would find it difficult to extricate himself.

Meanwhile, the two men who occupied his thoughts had dined at the club—Dickie through motives of discretion, and Middlemarch to bear him company.

The latter reached his home shortly after Lawrence's departure and found his wife in a mood of ominous frigidity, for which he could in nowise account, but with a wisdom born of experience he asked no questions. Instead, he cheerfully ignored the impending arraignment, and ostentatiously displaying fatigue, he prepared to retire.

Mrs. Middlemarch, unable longer to endure the tension, unmasked her batteries, but warily.

"Poor little Nannie Draper came over this afternoon."

"Yes?" John was sedulously examining the top of his head in the mirror to see if a single hair broke the shiny, glabrous expanse.

Receiving no further encouragement his wife after a pause continued:

"She was simply heartbroken. Dickie is behaving abominably!"

"Is that so! By George! I believe that new antibald stuff you found is doing me good. What's Dickie been up to?"

"He's deliberately deceiving that poor child! Out motoring alone with another woman and lying about it." Mrs. Middlemarch looked straight into her husband's bland face and added with pointed significance. "Fortunately for her she found him out."

"Well, well, you never can tell about those young fellows, can you?" responded John virtuously. "I never would have believed it of Dickie. Upon my soul, it's disgraceful!"

"You might well say so." His wife's eyes narrowed suddenly. "By the way, you just left him, didn't you?"

"Yes, but he didn't say anything—why

can't that girl put my slippers twice in the same place?"

Unheeding the obvious lead, Mrs. Middlemarch followed her self-appointed course.

"I knew you dined with him, of course. Nora gave me your phone message, but I thought you might have dropped in afterward to see the judge—or old Mr. Danforth, perhaps."

"Danforth!" John looked up, off guard in his surprise. "No, I—he—"

"Oh, of course, how stupid of me! He's at Mount Clemens, isn't he?"

"Mount Clemens?" he repeated, and then divining a possible trap he added lamely: "Yes, he—he left Monday."

"Aren't you mistaken? He went two weeks ago." Mrs. Middlemarch drew herself up and her ample proportions seemed visibly to swell with indignation. "Dickie Draper isn't the only one who went philandering last Sunday evening, as poor Nannie, herself, said. Where were *you*, John Middlemarch?"

Her husband sat down suddenly, a retrieved slipper dangling inanely from either hand.

"My dear Henrietta—"

"Don't you 'Henrietta' me, I want no more subterfuges. Where did you go? Remember I know more than you think."

"If you do, any further discussion is useless! I was interested in a business deal, as I told you—a private matter. If your unnecessary demand for details compelled me to—er—"

"A private matter indeed! You were motoring with a woman! Half the town knows it."

"Oh Lord!"

"Poor little Nannie Draper—"

"What!" John Middlemarch dropped his slippers.

"Nannie may have been a simple, confiding innocent, but she's fortunate to have found her husband out in time. I thought I knew you thoroughly, but what I learned to-day has opened even my eyes!"

John seemed to be struggling with a

sort of stupefaction. Twice he started to speak but curbed himself and sat rubbing his brow in a bewildered fashion. Finally, with an assumption of injured dignity, which was plainly an effort, he said:

"Henrietta, if after nearly a quarter of a century you can't trust me—"

"Trust you! Hah!" The lady rose to unconscious melodrama. "I'll trust you when you tell me who that woman was and what you were doing with her in an automobile on Sunday night!"

For some inexplicable reason John's face brightened visibly at her last words, but he replied in a tone of outraged dignity mingled with resignation:

"What would be the use of any protestations from me if as you say yourself you do not trust me? Henrietta, I wouldn't have believed it of you! If at this late date you choose to believe any idle, slanderous rumors, I will not try to refute them!"

"You won't because you can't! If you had Dickie Draper's imagination, I suppose you would make up as many silly falsehoods as he tried to tell to that poor, trusting girl who married him. It is my opinion you, too, were equally concerned in this affair!"

"Great Heavens, this is too much! I don't know where Dickie Draper was on Sunday night, and I don't care! My conscience is clear and I refuse to be catechized any longer." He sprang to his feet and began pacing to and fro with as wide a stride as his somewhat short legs would permit. "I have borne with you, Henrietta, with your whims, and questions and nagging for more years than I want to look back on, but even a worm will turn some day. If you drive me too far I'll—by jove, I'll give you good reason to worry!"

Mrs. Middlemarch stared at him incredulously for a moment, then melted into tears.

"Oh, that I should have lived to hear such words from you!" she moaned. "What have I ever done to deserve this treatment?"

John, as much surprised at her collapse as she had been at his unprecedented self-assertion, paused and eyed her askance.

"Well, why in thunderation don't you practise some of that science you're forever talking about? Why don't you give a fellow a chance?"

"Then who were you with—?" She seized avidly upon her opportunity, but he interrupted her.

"Look here, who's been talking about me, anyway? If you'll stop crying and making a scene, we'll soon get at the bottom of this. It's a case of mistaken identity, that's what it is." He brightened again as this fortunate possibility of an evasion presented itself. "Shouldn't wonder if some one saw Dickie Draper, wherever he was and thought—"

"No, John, don't insult my intelligence with such a feeble excuse." Mrs. Middlemarch was rapidly recovering herself. "If you can assure me you were not motoring with any one on Sunday evening—if you would only be frank and tell me where you were—"

"There's the phone!"

Welcoming the interruption, John dashed from the room and stumbled downstairs in the dark, heedless of his bare feet. Just within the library, however, he rapped his ankle smartly against an outstanding rocker. Hopping nimbly on one foot, he nursed the other with both hands, emitting sundry ejaculations the while, but the phone rang again insistently. Grabbing the receiver, he exclaimed none too gently:

"Well?"

"Say," Dickie Draper's voice came to him excitedly over the wire, "where the devil were you on Sunday night?"

"Ow!" John forgot his injured ankle and fairly howled in a mighty explosion of pent-up wrath. "Did you have to ring me up at this hour to ask me that, you young idiot? A fine mess you and your family have gotten me into with your escapades! What do you mean by mixing

me up in your troubles? I have enough of my own!"

"'Escapades,' nothing. My wife was at your house to-day when somebody called your wife on the phone and told her about you. Here I have been getting blamed for something you've done, and you're old enough to know better!" Dickie returned indignantly. Then he added in an earnest undertone: "Sh-h! I'm talking for my wife's benefit, old man! She's listening from up-stairs."

"So is mine!" yelled John. "You can speak for yourself, I'm not going to be dragged into your affairs! Your wife comes and tells mine what a fool you've been making of yourself, and now Henrietta accuses me of being in cahoots with you. At my time of life, too! I'll stand a lot for a friend, but this is a confounded outrage!"

"But look here," Dickie insisted, "who telephoned your wife to-day, anyway?"

"I don't know; it's none of your business!"

"You may find that it is before you're through. I've got a particular reason for asking you, Middlemarch. I think the same person told on you who has been trying to stir up trouble for me, and if I catch them, I'll make them pay for it. I'll see you to-morrow—"

"Not if I see you first! I tell you, it's bad enough to have your own wife accuse you of gadding around the country in an automobile with some female you never even saw, without having your friends try to make a scapegoat of you!" Middlemarch's tones became thin and reedy, as self-pity overcame him. "Here I am a perfectly innocent man—"

"Then where were you on Sun—?"

"Oh, go to—thunderation!"

The limitations of the average male vocabulary were manifested by the fact that both gentlemen resorted to one and the same expression, explosive but decidedly ambiguous, as the receivers clicked in unison.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

One Damsel in Distress

by Octavus Roy Cohen

Co-author with J. U. Giesy of "The Reckless Age," "The Matrimaniac," etc.

THIS is the first baseball novelette of the season. Baseball fans, we know, will eat it up; and the others—are there any others in these "diamond-studded" United States? Anyway, they'll know why the fans are so wild about it. Think you would like to be Red Williams?—THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

TO "WILLIAMS" OR NOT?

LOOK me over carefully and guess what I am.
Wrong!

I'm *not* an advertisement for the House of Horkheimer at all. I'm a hero!

I'm kind of surprised myself; in fact the whole thing was accidental; but when a girl with two redly kissable lips, and a shape like the Venus de Milo, and a tear hanging pendent in each eye—well, when a girl like that gives a fellow the once-over, and tells him that if she isn't saved promptly and at once, she, the said Venus, will forever be past the point of foiling the villain; when she does that it's enough to make a guy do things like you read of in mythology.

As I say, it was all a series of accidents with me as the accidentee. Oh! I know that things in stories never happen by accident or coincidence, but this isn't fiction—it's straight goods. Believe me, it took

a half a dozen accidents to make a hero out of me, though, of course, until right recently I wouldn't admit it in public print.

There were several reasons. In the first place, no man who has had brains enough to hang around a university for four years and still fool a sour-orange faculty into handing him a sheepskin which designates him a B.A., and other Latin things, likes to admit that he's had his pockets picked by an ordinary dip.

He was an innocent-looking chap. Hereafter I'm going to steer clear of that kind. If a guy looking like a cross between Teddy Roosevelt and Pancho Villa sits down beside me and curses in seven different languages, I'll trust him with my diamond scarf-pin. But the next pink-cheeked lad with a mama's-boy look in his wide-open blue eyes that asks me if this is the train he's supposed to be on, is liable to be stepped on right hard. If he isn't too big.

He was clever though. When the con-

ductor came around to collect another section of my six-foot transcontinental ticket I felt glad that my clothes had been buttoned on tightly. Else I'd probably have been Mr. September Morn.

I'm asking you now, do I look like a lad who would try to beat the railroad out of a measly, miserable ride? Certainly not. Then why should that conductor have doubted my story? He did, though, and he gave me the option of paying my fare or getting off at the next water-tank.

I thought it over a while and decided I'd get off. My assets at that particular minute consisted of a Columbian half-dollar which had long done duty as a pocket-piece—and which had a hole in it. The conductor had a nice face, but he said duty was duty, and just then his duty was to put me off the train.

I tried to argue with him—I told him that the train was going on to Memphis anyway, and that my being on board didn't make it any heavier or use up any more coal—but he couldn't see it my way.

He pulled the little cord overhead, the engineer whistled to show that he was in cahoots with the other uniformed banditti on the train, and after awhile we stopped at what, to judge by a street surrounded on both sides by brick stores, looked like a regular town. The conductor let me take my suit-case with me, and when I was getting off, advised me not to try that game again.

"I won't," I said fervidly. "The next angel-child that asks me for a stick of chewing-gum is going to think Halley's comet has paid a return visit."

Elmville was the name tacked on the end of the yellow depot I was left at, and I guess it must have been a right unusual thing for a train to hesitate there long enough to drop a passenger, because I hadn't begun to get my bearings before the little lady I've already remarked on sailed up to me, grabbed my hand, and allowed she was plumb tickled to death that I'd arrived in time.

"I was so afraid you'd miss connection in Birmingham," she bubbled.

"Is that a fact? I didn't, though; and here I am."

"It's such a relief to see you," she says. "How's your arm?"

"Very well, I thank you. How's yours?"

She threw back her head and laughed, and I saw I'd gotten into the humorist class. Then she turns to the guy who's been standing in her wake and nods him and me together.

"This is Mr. Walters," she explained. "Mr. Walters—Mr. Williams."

"Pleased to meet you," gurgled Walters. I nodded ditto and looked him over.

Right at the jump I didn't cotton to this Walters chap much. His eyes were too close-set, and his chin got to a point about two inches before nature should have intended. He seemed right pleased to meet me.

"We got your Atlanta wire," he says, "and we were afraid the train would get into Birmingham too late for you to catch the limited. If it had you'd have gotten in on the local just an hour before the game. You say your arm's in good trim?"

"Best ever. What's the dope on this game?"

"We couldn't explain in detail over the wires," pipes up the girl, "but the pennant and the fortunes of the club depend on this afternoon's game. It's the last of the season, and if you don't win it for us—"

Yep! You're right the first time. They'd got me mixed up with a guy who would have caught the same train if he'd been able to, and who was to save the game for the home team. My Gawd! it brought back all my dime-novel days when I thought Christy Mathewson was the greatest pitcher in the world except Frank Merriwell.

Of course if I'd been a born hero I'd have nobly told the dame that it was all a mistake, and that my name was James Heston, with the privilege of a B.A. after it, and the closest I ever came to saving a game for any team was when I dropped a long fly in the ninth inning

with the score one in our favor and the bases full and saved the game for the other team.

That play was the principal reason I didn't win my initial at college, and also why my classmates smaller than I rather hesitate to say anything in my presence about Ty Cobb or any other great outfielder. Baseball is a sore spot with me, and up to that minute I thought I'd retired forever from the lime-light of the diamond. But fate, you know, won't let a poor sucker alone.

Anyway, after she'd introduced herself as Ethel Dale, and repeated the statement that I had the good samaritan backed off the map when it came to being the right guy in the right place at the right time, I just didn't have the heart to break the news brutally. Besides, I had one plugged four-bit piece in my pocket, and a remembrance that I'd expected to breakfast on the buffet-car.

We hung around awhile—just long enough for me to see that whoever the real Mr. Williams was, he was due for a right warm welcome in that burg—and then this Walters fish excused himself with the remark that he had to trot along and see how much money had been taken in on the advance ticket sale.

"You'll be at the Elm Inn, won't you?" he asked me.

"You're the judge," I came back at him. "Will I?"

"Yes. It's the only decent hotel in town. I'll be trotting along now."

"Arthur," called the girl. "Remember!"

His face kind of clouded up at that.

"Oh! don't worry, Ethel; I won't. But I tell you it was our only chance to pull the club out of the hole."

He moseyed along down the street with Ethel and me pacing along slowly and surely in his wake.

It was my cue all right, all right, but I was shy of the job. Believe me, kid, if there's anything harder in this world than to explain to a pretty woman that you are not the hero you think she thinks you

are, I haven't run across it. I made about three false starts, and then, finally, when she left me a spot where I had to say something, I blurted it out.

"There's an awful mistake here, Miss Dale," I said. "My name is not Williams."

She smiled brightly at that.

"Of course it's not," she said. "Everybody knows that."

"It's Heston; Jimmy Heston," I blurted desperately. It didn't feeze her.

"Is it? Art Walters had charge of all the arrangements. We'll pay you after the game. You see, we didn't want them to know we were ringing in a class A pitcher on them so we decided we'd use the name Williams. Oh! don't look at me that way; it's fair enough. They've rung in four high-class players under assumed names, one of them a corking good pitcher, and we have to fight fire with fire, you know. If Elmville loses this afternoon I'm ruined!"

Say, when she said that word I got a picture of Verdun. I saw that the hardest part of my job still lay ahead.

"I still say it's a mistake," I repeated. "I never pitched a game of ball in my life—after I put on long pants."

CHAPTER II.

UNDERSTANDING ONE ANOTHER.

SHE stopped in her tracks, swung around to face me, and her baby-blue eyes popped open enough to let those two ever-ready tears look like a pair of twin diamonds.

"Never pitched a game—" she quavered. "Then you're not—"

"I'm Jimmy Heston: Princeton '16, traveling West for experience. And I'm getting it, too. A baby-faced blond of the masculine gender lifted my wallet containing diploma, letters of introduction, coin of the realm, and ticket. The conductor allowed the Southern wasn't running on charity or for charity. He stopped the train at this town and invited me to

part company with him and his. I accepted the invitation because he had the squarest jaw I ever saw outside the prize ring. I didn't have the heart to tell you right off, because you and this Walters lad seemed right happy to see the man you thought I was. Aw! say—don't cry, not here, anyway. Let's go somewhere more secluded."

"I—I—c-c-c-can't hel-l-lup it," she sobbed, biting her lower lip so the tears wouldn't become too public. "I—I—I'm ruined!"

"I'm awful sorry; honest I am. I'm here, broke, down and out, ready for anything. Can't I help?"

"I don't see how. The local that the real Williams will have to come on is always a couple of hours late. If it came in on time to-day it would be a miracle—and miracles don't happen."

"Oh! yes indeed they do."

"What do you mean?"

"My meeting you." There was a strained silence for a few minutes. "Now listen here, Miss Dale, I'm no pitcher, but maybe if you can find yourself willing to trust me and you'll show me the woodpile that has the nigger in it, I might be able to give you some good advice."

"A-a-advice isn't what I n-n-need," she said, getting all sobby again. "I n-n-need a p-p-pitcher."

"Listen here," I insisted sternly. "I judge that you do need some advice, and even if my credentials have been lost, they're none the less O. K. I gather that you were counting on this Williams ringer to pull the team to a pennant. He hasn't shown up. He'll probably sizzle in on the local. Maybe, if you're willing to trust me I might be able to work things so they'll delay the game until the real pitcher gets here."

"Oh!" The tears dropped ker-splash, and she smiled so sunnily that I looked around. "I'm so much obliged!"

That hit me where I live; I couldn't quite make it.

"For what?"

"Saving the situation so splendidly."

"But—but—Miss Dale, I'm afraid I haven't saved any situation—yet."

"You said you would, so that makes it all right."

Right there was where I started being a hero. Do you blame me? No, certainly not. If there had been any way of getting out of it I'd have done it, but there wasn't. Just you wait until a pink-cheeked, blue-eyed, perfect thirty-four tells you that you can take the earth to the side of a hill and roll it down like a bowling-ball—wait until that happens, I say, and you'll make old Atlas look like a selling-plater when it comes to trying.

Why, I'd have eaten ten-penny nails out of a German submarine for that little lady along about then, though just at that time I wasn't wise to the size of the job I'd tackled.

Believe me, the chap who first said that ignorance was bliss spoke a little more than a mouthful. He was wise and then a few. Why, if I'd had the faintest conception of what I was getting myself into I'd have tied a percussion cap to the seat of my pants and sat down on a barrel of gunpowder. Honest; it would have been shorter and a whole heap safer.

"What time does the local get in, Miss Dale?"

"It's due at two o'clock. It usually gets in about four."

"And the hour for the game?"

"Three."

"H-m! No chance of getting a postponement until to-morrow?"

"No," sadly. "They granted us a three-day postponement, thanks to Art Walters. And this is the third day. You see, the two teams were tied at the end of the pennant race, and they've been playing a seven-game series to decide it. Each team has won three games, and now they've pulled in three awful ringers on us, and—we—we—we're beaten."

Deep down in my heart I was inclined to agree with the lady, but it's my motto to cheer up other folks all I can when it don't cost anything but a little wind, so I started in telling her that while I wasn't

any Walter Johnson, I did know a thing or two about the great national pastime.

"And you?" I wound up. "What's your interest in this game? Civic pride?"

Those morning-glories of hers widened maddeningly.

"Not entirely. Oh! of course, not entirely that. You see, I own the club and the franchise."

Now listen; if you saw a two-by-twice Pomeranian walking the streets, and a bull-necked bruiser with two cauliflower ears and three busted knuckles waltzed up to you and allowed that it was his li'l tootsie-wootsie, you'd be inclined to be surprised, wouldn't you? Sure. So would I.

But the surprise I'd get in a case of that kind wouldn't run one-two-twenty with the shock her words handed me. I guess I must have showed it in this face that was wished on me when they told papa it was a boy, and that mother and child were doing well.

"What's funny about that?" she piped plaintively. "I thought everybody knew I owned the Tigers."

"N-no. I didn't. Is—is—it an asset?"

I guess her dad must have been a scrapper—or maybe her mother, because her little jaw squared all of a sudden and the words slipped out from between clenched teeth with a sound like a drop of water that's gone wrong and happened onto a hot stove-lid.

"It's a liability!"

"M-m-h-m! And you want to pull the club through to victory as a matter of pride?"

"Pride? *Pride?* Listen here, Mr.—Mr—"

"Heston. Jimmy Heston."

"Mr. Heston. I'm an orphan. And about all my folks left me was the family photographs and the ball club. And the club—franchise, grounds, players' contracts and uniforms, are mortgaged."

"Tough."

"No, it's tender, so far. The tough part is still to come. We had a pretty good year, all things considered. Art

Walters is treasurer of the club, and Art has always been a friend of mine—"

"He—er—a—looked proprietary."

A little bit of pink in a general southerly direction from those sky-blue eyes.

"He'd like to look more so, I'm afraid.

Anyway, he knows baseball and he's had the handling of all the money. Some time ago he showed me the books and said that while we had a nice little balance in the bank it wasn't going to be enough to pay off any of the principal sum on the mortgage which covers the club."

"I see." It was a foolish thing to say but she stopped and looked at me right expectantly and I came across with the first words that popped into my head. It was true too. I did see—and I kept on seeing the prettiest girl I ever expect to see. (And I hope she sees this!)

"It's this way," Art told me. "We've got to pay off that mortgage. We'll have a fat surplus in hand when we're half through the post-season series with the Norvel White Sox—if they happen to tie up with us, as they ought to do seeing that they're winding up the season with the Canaries and we're idle. If we could double that surplus we'd be all to the good and have a little net profit to divide among the stockholders."

"I'm the stockholders, you see: it's all mine, and it's the only thing I have in the world except poor relations.

"Listen, Art," I said. "It's all very well to talk about doubling capital, but it isn't done outside of story books."

"I'll bet I could do it," he said. "And it ought to be done."

"Don't be foolish, Art. You see that the park is jammed for the series and that we make every cent possible, and I'll see that the salaries are paid and the creditors satisfied."

"Now, honestly, Mr. Heston, that was every word that was said between us on the subject. When the series started we won the first two games. During a Sunday lay-off the Sox got in touch with some big league players and ran them in on us. They took three of the next four games,

making the series three all. Then Art came to me looking terribly troubled. He said—he said—” it began to look like she was going to have the weeps again, but she controlled herself with an effort. “ Oh! it’s too terrible to repeat in detail. Anyway, after we had won the first game he’d found some one who bet with him—and he bet—every cent that was in the club treasury—bet all that money that we would win!”

“ Go-o-d *night!* And then?”

“ I grew desperate. I made Art wire off for a fine pitcher, because the Sox are weak hitters and I knew a fine pitcher could hold ’em and our boys are fighting mad. You don’t know how wild this town is about baseball: it’s something terrific. He finally got in touch with this man Williams, and Williams said he’d come down for a hundred and fifty dollars and expenses—”

“ Say! How much did this Artie-boy bet?”

“ Almost three thousand dollars,” she said in a hushed voice. “ He don’t—what do you call it?—pike!”

I whistled softly.

“ No! He don’t seem to care a three-cent darn what he does with other folks’ money, does he?”

“ He had the good of the club at heart,” she flashed loyally: that loyalty stuff’s a great thing—for the guy on the receiving end. “ He would be broken hearted if the team lost.”

“ Sure—but he wouldn’t be broke!”

“ I don’t see—”

“ Neither ’do I, Miss Dale. And it begins to look to me that you’re in a rather serious fix. You say they have three ringers? Three corking good players?”

“ Four. The three new ones have come in since the series started. Two of ’em make a brand new battery. They won two of the games from us.”

“ And aside from these ringers how do the two teams shape up?”

“ We were slightly better. They outclass us now. But if only Mr. Williams can get here in time—”

“ Whoa, there! This is time for ten-second thinking, not weeping. We’ve just simply got to delay that game until tomorrow.”

With that she clapped her hands like I’d really done something.

“ Yes, I forgot that. We must. He will be here then and we’ll win and— Her face clouded up. “ But how?” she asked suddenly.

“ H-m! Where there’s a will—say, have you got insurance on the grounds—the stands?”

“ Yes. But what—”

“ We might set fire to ’em.”

“ That’s arson,” she said sternly, “ and in this State they punish arson with death.”

“ Oh! I guess that lets *that* out.”

“ Yes,” — ruefully — “ I guess it does. What else can you suggest?”

I scratched my head. To say I was up against a tough proposition is stating it mildly. It was a thousand times worse than tough. But with that baby doll expecting me to do things for her—

I made up my mind I’d make a great shake at something and then fade away right sudden if I didn’t make good. Lordy, I knew if I flivvered I’d never have the nerve to face those innocent blue eyes of her again. Ball team owner! Say, she should have been posing for Haskell Coffin in a flower garden, that’s what she was best suited for.

But there wasn’t any use trying to think connectedly with her looking at me, because somehow I couldn’t seriously think that there was such a thing as trouble in the world. So I made a getaway and headed for the Elm Inn, with the parting injunction that everybody in Elmville, including Art Walters, must continue to believe that I was Red Williams, the expected pitcher.

“ There are two reasons for that,” I said, “ the principal one is that if the Norvel team learns that Red hasn’t arrived they wouldn’t consent to a postponement of the game for love or money. And if the local lads know that I’m not Williams

their nerve will go to pieces. They 'll lose the little chance for the game that they still have. Because, Miss Dale, baseball is baseball; and there's no telling when a worm is going to turn and bite the hand that feeds him. There's always a possibility—not a probability, mind you—that the weaker team will have a batting rally and win, and we've got to play this game straight across the board."

CHAPTER III.

THE MIRACLE.

I LEFT her after she pointed out the house where she lived with two maiden aunts, and hiked to the Elm Inn. I wanted to mosey around a bit and get the lay of the land. I also wanted to swap chin-music with this Walters jasper again. Under ordinary circumstances I guess he wouldn't have gotten on my nerves, but it was about as plain to me as a new dollar that he wouldn't mind a certain person by the name of Dale changing over to the Walters list in the town directory.

Not that Ethel would have considered it under normal circumstances, but then the town was awfully small and two people living there had a chance for a heap of this propinquity stuff.

Naa! I wasn't falling in love with Ethel Dale. Why I hadn't known her but an hour and—say! She is a pippin, though!

The Elm Inn isn't much to look at unless you're interested in antiques. I guess there isn't a southern town of under 15,000 without the twin sister to the inn: a two-story frame structure, once red but now turned a weather-beaten, dirty brown; two long verandas spanning the front, three town loafers sitting in an old fashioned swing on the side of the lower veranda, two shade trees in front and the odor of fried chicken coming from the mysterious realms in the rear.

I'm not much on antiques or art, but I'm thunder on fried chicken. Besides, as I mentioned, nothing had slipped inside

of me to gratify a regular bachelor of arts appetite that morning and I was ready to go to any lengths for a square meal. But it was easy: cinch.

I registered as Williams. Then I asked for a room with bath.

"Bath with all rooms," returned the portly lady who was on minute duty at the desk where a blank book did service as a register.

"Huh?" That was a new one on me. The hotel gave me the impression that it had been built before Fort Sumter was fired on and in those days people had to go some for a bath.

"Yes," she repeated sternly. "Guests are welcome to bathe at any time. The bathroom's at the end of the hall, right by the corner of the back piazza."

Having digested that I took another soul-satisfying whiff of the fried chicken.

"Too late for breakfast?" I inquired mildly.

She took a glance at the register, and then she beamed all over.

"Oh! you're *the* Mr. Williams who's come to win for us this afternoon?"

I blushingly admitted that I was the guy in question. She was all action in about a half-second.

"Just you make yourself right to home, Mr. Williams. I'll fix you up the finest meal you ever tasted in about one shake of a lamb's tail. Have a seat; have a seat. Just a second now."

It was worth waiting for: four waffles that seemed to be all crust and crispness, served with fresh country butter and maple sirup; fried chicken, biscuits that would have melted in my mouth if I'd given them time, and last of all a half of a cantaloup that would have put a Kas-saba to the blush.

"I fixed the breakfast myself," beamed the landlady when I'd finished the last piece of close-to-the-rind cantaloup. "I even picked out the mushmelon. And you must pay me back this afternoon by beating that horrid Norvel team."

It was up to me to say something.

"You understand baseball, ma'am?"

She laughed.

"Oh! no indeed, but I always go to the games. Everybody does, and I've already told lots of people that you were going to win for us."

I began to have a suspicion that if Norvel won that afternoon I'd better think about making myself a bit scarce. Anyway I got to my room, sat down in a once-easy chair to think things over and presto! comes a knock at my door.

When I heard that knock I knew something unusual was going to happen. How? I don't know—but I *knew* it. It was a furtive knock, and the man who came into the room when I gave him the word was furtive and slinking.

He was a little fellow: he wasn't big enough to make a good morning meal for a husky man. He wore a gray cheviot suit, a gray hat, gray socks and a pair of shiny, black shoes. He slunk into the room, closed the door very softly and looked around.

"Williams!"

He hissed the word like the good old villain in melodrama. I put my feet to the floor and stood on 'em.

"Yours truly," I said.

"Here it is," says he, shoving an envelope in my hands. It was addressed to George Williams.

"Much obliged," I remarked, meaning that I thanked him for telling me my first name. Then I started to tear open the flap. Man! you'd have thought there was an infernal machine inside that envelope by the way he leaped across the floor and grabbed my arm.

"Not now!" he whispered. "Wait until I get out of the room."

"You're crazy!" I remarked, opening the envelope. And inside were four nice, new fifty-dollar bills: two hundred dollars avoirdutroy. "Is it real?" I asked inanely.

The little shrimp's face was flushed a brick-red.

"Of course it's real. You get another hundred when you've kept your agreement."

"My agreement?"

His face showed annoyance at my dense ignorance. It would have showed a heap more annoyance if he'd known how ignorant I really was. But I'd begun to smell a mice and I was playing things close to the chest.

"Of course. Didn't you get that wire?"

"Sure," I lied happily.

"Well—we just don't want you to make it too raw. We've bet heavily on this game and the minute the Norvel team has won you get that extra hundred—in cash."

Norvel! And they thought I was Williams! I didn't need opera glasses to get wise then—in some way the deal had been framed up and the Norvel bunch had bought out Red Williams for three hundred dollars!

Believe me, I wanted to hand it to the Norvel crowd for playing their little game absolutely and utterly safe.

Elmville hires a star pitcher to win the deciding game, Norvel discovers who it is and buys him out. Lordy! I stopped wondering then why it was that Norvel had consented to postpone the game until the mound wonder had arrived—it was so they couldn't lose!

Pickle! You bet there was and that little pink-cheeked lassie was in it deep. It didn't matter now whether the local came in on time or not. The game was gone! Man alive! it was fierce. That poor little doll robbed of her home and assets. It was just simply up to some big strong man with a B. A. degree to carry her off and marry her. She was too young and tender to look after herself and more mundane affairs.

"Much obliged," I said again. "I'll see that you get your money's worth. But there 'll be no crude stuff, of course. It's got to seem close."

"Sure," he agreed in that nervous, jumpy way of his. "Sure. Sure. But, of course—take no chances."

"No—I'll take no chances. It's a sure thing!" And I spoke a mouthful that time, believe me.

The undersized boob slipped out of the door and pat-patted down the hall, and hardly had he gone before a bell-hop, who three times a day was a dining room waiter, rapped on the door to say that there was a telephone call for me in the office down-stairs.

It was Ethel, and her voice was all quavery with excitement and happiness.

"Oh! Mr. Heston: guess what?"

"What?"

"But I mustn't call you 'Heston,' must I?"

"No, you certainly mustn't."

"But isn't it wonderful? Isn't it the sweetest thing in the world?"

"You bet it is."

"Why when I— But you don't know what I'm talking about."

"I know what you're talking *with*."

"What?"

"Your voice; and you asked if it wasn't the sweetest thing in the world. I agreed."

"Oh!" I heard a giggle and then: "You're horrid. I mean the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"Not yet."

"Listen—" that eolian voice dropped to a croony, secretive, just-you-and-me whisper. "*The local is on time!*"

CHAPTER IV.

MR. WILLIAMS UNDERSTANDS PERFECTLY.

TWENTY minutes before I'd have busted the receiver in my gratification—but now: pshaw! it didn't matter to me whether Red Williams ever reached Elmville. I didn't say anything because I couldn't bear to throw another shock into the poor little kid. As it was I was shaping up as the horriest boob she'd ever had in her pampered young life.

"Y-y-y-you don't seem glad."

"I—I—am glad: terribly glad! I must come up there at once and see you. Please—"

"Certainly. Tell you what: I'll count

—real slow—and see how high I get before you reach me."

Now, I'm asking you if that ain't putting it up to a guy? If my watch was right she must have counted six less than nothing when I stood on her front veranda kind of heavy in the chest and trying to smile like it was all in the day's work.

"And now we're saved, aren't we?"

"M-m—h-m! As much as Red Williams can save us."

"As much as—listen, Mr. Heston, I'm terribly disappointed in you. You don't seem a bit glad."

"I am. I'm happy as a lark. I could sing—tra-la-le-la-le-la!"

"You look like an undertaker," she averred, "and sound like a misguided and consumptive siren."

"I guess I ought to be happy," I remarked. "I would be if I were of the strictly mercenary breed. Did you ever see that much unearned and tainted increment in your pretty young life?" I spread out my palm and disclosed four new, crisp fifty-dollar bills. She gasped.

"Where did you get it?"

"That," I said, breaking the news with a gentleness and tact which in college won me the soubriquet of "Hob-Nail Heston." "That is the money paid to Mr. Red Williams on a prearranged deal—to earn which he must see to it that the Elmville team *loses* the game!"

Then I plunged in desperately—not looking at her face, because I wanted to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and I was afraid if my psychic current got mixed up with hers I just naturally wouldn't have the heart.

When I stuck a mental "Finis" on the climax I sat back expecting to see that little lace handkerchief mopping away at those wide-open eyes, but did I? I did not. Instead, there was a steely glint in the blue and that square set to the jaw that I remarked on once before.

"This is pretty bad," she said calmly and evenly, hysterics forgotten for once. "I suppose we could have the Norvel manager arrested for conspiracy?"

Into my head popped the first faint glimmerings of an idea. I let it simmer awhile, and let her quiz ahead.

"No-o," I answered, "they're too clever for that. We could arrest the little geezer in the gray suit if we could lay hands on him, but this was a cash transaction, and the Norvel bunch doesn't figure in it actually."

"It's hard—" her little hands were balled into two tiny, fighting fists. "It means that they knew this Williams could beat them. If I had him where I want him—"

All of a sudden it busted. That idea of mine—bango! just like a skyrocket on a dark night. Before either of us knew what was what I'd slipped a cog and hugged her, apologized, been forgiven, and was dancing an extemporaneous hula around the porch.

"I've got it!" I yelled, "I've got it!"

Her little eyes were dancing again, and the light of a thousand devils was reborn.

"If you're that happy, I know it must be an inspiration."

"It is. It's better than that. You gave me the idea. We can't arrest the Norvel bunch, but we *can* arrest this Mr. Red Williams when he pulls in on the local!"

She clapped her hands, and then her face fell.

"But that's an empty sort of victory, isn't it? It leaves Elmville with an ordinary semi-professional team against the Norvel ringers, doesn't it?"

"No," I grinned, with the general expression of Balaam's pet steed on my face. "Not exactly. We're going to win!"

"But *how*?" She stamped her r-C shoe with an impatient toss of her dainty head. "How?"

"Ssh! Red Williams is going to pitch us to victory!"

"I—I—don't catch on—"

"You willing to trust this to me?"

"Of course."

"Now listen; is there a magistrate in town whom you can trust, not only to do

what you ask, but also to keep his mouth shut tighter'n a clam that's drowned to death?"

"Stevens. Yes, he's the man."

"Good. Come along with me and do what I say. You're going, first of all, to swear out a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Red Williams."

I'll never forget the face of that grizzled old magistrate when the little dame walked in with me, whom he thought was Red Williams, and swore out a warrant for the arrest of a gentleman by that name!

True to his promise, though, he asked no questions, although he looked from my grinning face to her smiling one, and I could see with half an eye that he thought we were both in line for unanimous election to the padded-cell row.

"What's the charge against Mr.—er—a—Williams?"

She looked at me and I looked at him.

"Fraud," I said calmly. "Fraud, and obtaining money under false pretenses and conspiracy; especially conspiracy. Don't leave that out, whatever you do."

He made a couple of motions like a fish that's come up for the third time and has a little too much air in his gullet for real comfort, and then he wrote out the little instrument. That done, he handed it to her, and she turned it over to me. I could see the thing was too much for him.

"Just have a constable out at the ball park," I said as we were going. "There's liable to be something doing. And say, you might make out an assault and battery warrant in blank. It might come in handy."

He choked a while.

"Very good. I know I promised not to ask questions, Miss Ethel, but—when you get ready to explain I wish you'd explain to me first."

"I will," she giggled, and then to me when we were safe out of earshot; "Isn't he the funniest old darling!"

From the magistrate's office we went down to the depot. One look at the time-board reassured me; the local was still

running two hours ahead of time, which, translated, meant that she was on time. I warned Ethel that she was to follow my lead from ace to deuce, and not to be surprised at anything that happened. She promised, and I knew she was enough of a sport to be as good as her word, even though that was given sight unseen.

And promptly at two o'clock she let out a little squeal, pressed my fingers, and pointed out the puffing local.

That train must have had a little pride at that; she made three false attempts before she finally choked to a halt in front of the depot.

"Where's the Pullman?" I asked the station agent. He looked at me like he thought I was dippy.

"Pullman? Whadaya think this is—the Dixie Flyer?"

I readily gathered his meaning; it was quite evident that the local boasted no velvety cushions. Then Red Williams got off the train.

Say! I've been told that when it comes to the two-fisted game I'm right handy, but I begun trembling the minute I lamped that chap. He was about my height, but he weighed at least thirty pounds more; heavy set, broad-shouldered, square-jawed, and with a nasty hang to his left eyelid.

Whoever that guy really was, and in whatever league he played, I'm betting a 1916 silver dollar to the hole around which a one-cent doughnut is constructed, that the umpires knew he was among those present. But it was up to me, and while I confess I might have shirked if I'd been handling the deal by my lonesome, there wasn't a thing to do but step into the fireworks' zone.

"Mr. Williams?" I inquired.

He looked me over slowly and insolently.

"That's my monniker," he growled.

"Mine's Heston. This young lady here owns the Elmvile Tigers."

I didn't like the look he threw her. In fact it rather made my flesh creep, and it made the girl blush. I guess it must have

been that which nerved me to talk straight from the shoulder.

"Williams," I said, "Miss Dale and I are onto you. We know you've been paid to throw the game to the Norvel team—"

He set his suit-case down and squared off. "Now listen here, cull; I don't wanna hafter mess that mama's-boy face all over y'r map, but—"

I flashed the warrant on him.

"Don't be an utter fool, Williams. Listen to what I have to say. This paper here is a warrant charging you with conspiracy, fraud, and accepting money under false pretenses. When I got to this town this morning they mistook me for you. A guy in a light gray suit slipped me two hundred in cash, thinking I was Williams—and he told me there was more where that came from when Elmvile *lost!* Get that? I've got the goods on you, Williams—"

His face was a bit chalky, but his kind never goes down without a bluff.

"Yuh got nothin' on me. Not a darned thing."

Once again that square set to Ethel Dale's chin. She sized up alongside Williams like a bantam hen making up to a Shanghai rooster.

"If we've got nothing on you, Mr. Red Williams," she snapped in that icy tone she had on tap for the proper occasion, "just you try any funny business. We'll have you in jail so quick it 'll make your head swim. Now listen to what Mr. Heston has to tell you."

He simmered down, and I talked briskly and to the point.

"And that's the way it stands now, Williams. You're going to be kept under cover until the game starts. And when the game starts you're going in there to pitch—and Elmvile is going to win! Get that—*Elmvile is going to win!*"

"Any man's li'ble to have an off day," he whined, with the belligerence gone from his manner.

"Is that so? But to-day isn't going to be an off day for Mr. Red Williams. Not on your life it isn't. He's going to pitch

air-tight ball or he's going to spend the night in the Elmville calaboose. There's going to be a couple of constables sitting at the two entrances of that ball park this afternoon, Williams, and — well, I guess you've got a pretty good idea that we're not exactly bluffing."

"But say, where do I get off at? I had a roll comin' to me."

"You get off when the game's over. And you get the money Elmville promised you—and not another cent."

"How about that two hundred from Bud Con—"

"Bud Connor, eh? That's the name of the man behind the deal. Much obliged, Red, for the info. Well, that two hundred isn't going to be earned, see? And it's going to stay in the treasury of the Elmville ball club."

Did Red Williams agree to our little plan? Can a Zeppelin fall? You betcha. Say, he tried to keep up a bluff front, but if I ever in my life saw a man that was scared stiff, Williams was it.

One time we let him read the arrest warrant, and when he finished I could tell by the ugly mug of him that if he had the power in his arm to pitch a no-hit game he'd do it. I even pointed out the two constables, and took the trouble to explain that down in Dixie, officers are prone to shoot first and make the arrest at their leisure. Believe me, kid, I had that bird's goat hog-tied.

CHAPTER V.

THE RESULT.

SAY! have you ever lived in a town of twelve thousand population (according to the census; 25,000 according to the local Chamber of Commerce) that had the baseball fever and an almost-pennant-winning team? If you haven't, invade one some day along toward the end of the season when a crucial series is under way—but no! you've got to get the spirit of the thing or it's no go.

This big league stuff is as much like

that sort of baseball as riding in a street-car is like being Barney Oldfield's lone passenger on a new, oiled track.

In the first place, in little towns, baseball is a community affair. Financially it is usually a losing proposition, and the public divides the expenses. But root! My Gawd! man, the three thousand fans, some of them from Norvel, that jammed the park that afternoon would have put a Polo Grounds crowd at the end of a Giant winning streak to the blush.

Everybody knew everybody else's first name and used it, and the sheet-metal works, around which the town is built, must have spent the last month manufacturing noise-making machines. It was as bad as a Yale-Harvard game when neither goal line has been crossed during the year—and if you've ever seen one of those things, bo, you know what rooting is.

Ethel told me I could trust Charley Harding, Elmville's second-baseman; and as Harding is about six-three, and proportionately broad, I felt somewhat safe in letting Red warm up with him behind the grand stand. I wanted to make a little grand stand play with the Norvel bunch—and I could see the stage was getting set.

Mike McGill, a husky ex-major leaguer, and manager of the Norvel Sox, looked over toward us a few times, kind of nervous like. The boys were loafing around, tapping fungos and tossing a few balls to one another, and bowing to the fair sex of their personal acquaintance, and I could see that Mike was looking for some one.

Presently he slunk off toward the third-base end of the frame grand stand, and I followed him—with my eyes; and sure enough he starts talking to the little man in gray who slipped me the two hundred! I had a good lone chuckle.

After a while McGill came striding back with a what-th'-hell swing to his shoulders, and a Jess Willard set to his jaw. He nodded to me, and I joined him right near home-plate, wearing a smile

like that of a blushing bride; right happy but a bit apprehensive.

"Who the devil are you?" snaps McGill.

"Napoleon," I answers, "crossing the Delaware."

"You think you're a smart one, huh?" He poked his ugly face in mine—and I removed mine. "Well, I'm here to tell you now—"

"That two hundred's safe, McGill—in the Elmvile coffers. You hadn't ought to have done that, Mike."

"Damn—"

"Swearing's naughty."

"Say, young feller," advised McGill, "you'd better remove yourself from being so close to me, *pronto!* That complexion is too pretty to spoil." He turned away and then swung on his heel and leered at me in a way that made me feel like the first day on the briny. "Yet!" he said by way of epilogue.

My bunch was scrappy enough, and of course they thought I was the Hector MacDonald that was going to pull 'em through. It wasn't until after the practise was over and two scared-looking umpires trotted onto the field that I played my big card.

I produced Red Williams!

I'd have given a million to know what was in Mike McGill's mind just then. On the other hand, I knew what Red Williams was thinking. He was thinking that a chance of mixing things with McGill was a heap preferable to spending a few weeks in the Elmvile lock-up—and then maybe fifty-two more in the county jail. If I'm any judge of men, Red went into that box prepared to pitch the game of his life.

And that game! My Gawd! Miss Agnes, it was a humdinger. Baseball! Say, this o-o stuff ain't base-ball; it's machinery. Baseball is the kind of stuff we pulled that day. At the end of the eighth inning the score was 3-3.

But they hadn't earned a run off Red; not one. All three had come in as the result of errors on the part of the local lads.

There wasn't an inning that somebody didn't get as far as third, and every ball and strike decision of the umps behind the bat was greeted with catcalls from one bunch of rooters or the other. Honest, those arbiters could have had the whole crowd pulled for criminal libel.

Poor Red! I got right sorry for him. Every time one of the men behind him would make a bobble he'd grow a sickly green, and 'tween innings, he'd plead:

"Be reasonable, Heston; be reasonable. I'm doin' my best. They ain't earned a run offen me; they ain't made but two clean hits. Every time I see you lookin' at that rod-totin' cop at the gate I get nervous. I'm tryin' to win; swear I am."

I felt like sympathizing with him, but I didn't dare.

"You'd better win, Red," I'd say, "or you're liable to stay in our midst awhile. And they say there are mice and snakes in this town jail."

"Ugh! I hate snakes."

"Me, too, Red. But a word to the wise, you know— Also, the wages of sin is the jug."

Neither side scored in the ninth session, although each set of fans had a half dozen cases of heart-failure. In the tenth the first Norvel man up walked, stole second, and was sacrificed to third. Then Red fanned the next two on six pitched balls. McGill was walking around like a chicken that's been suddenly and completely deprived of his head.

With two out in our half of the tenth we had the bases jammed. The next man up dribbled one down the third-base line. The Norvel third-sacker was a Norvel boy, and he got nervous and dribbled the ball. Our man slid—but they caught him.

After we'd made the local police force pull their guns on the crowd to get 'em back behind the lines, only promising them that after the game was over the umpires would be fair meat to the first person on deck, we went into the field.

Red fanned the first man, and the second lined to short. And the third batter—

Connected with the second pitched ball and lined it over the left field fence!

If it hadn't been a tragedy it would have been the funniest thing I ever saw. I swung around and I saw little Ethel Dale biting her lips and staring at me—*me*, mind you, like she expected me to get out there and do a Connie Mack all by my lonesome. They didn't score again, and when poor Williams came in he was all over a cold sweat.

"Have a heart, Heston. I didn't go for to do it. Honest, I didn't. I thought I had him, but he just leaned up against it, and—blooie!"

"You're second at bat this inning, Red, and you'd better by a durned sight score a run," I said sternly.

The first man up popped out to right. Then Red laid a nasty one down in front of the plate and scooted for first. The pitcher got the ball and heaved it there in time, but Red went up in the air and started in the general direction of the bag.

I guess that first-baseman was human. He saw a pair of fiery eyes and a set of shining spikes, and he heard a few guttural words coming from between Red's lips that wouldn't have any place at all in a missionary meeting. He ducked off the bag and Red was safe.

Next man up sacrificed neatly, and Red got to second. The Norvel pitcher, cool as ice, wound up and shot over a strike. Red looked at me pitifully, and I nodded. On the next pitched ball he shot for third. This time he spiked his man—but he was safe.

Next ball was a strike. Two out, two strikes, and the game lost if Red failed to score!

There wasn't anything to do but take a chance, and believe me he took it. About all that was visible of Red was those demon eyes of his and a cloud of dust in his immediate rear. He lunged, spikes first, straight at the catcher. But the catcher was one of the Norvel ringers, and he'd faced spikes before.

The ball spanked into his mitt, and he just spread his legs far enough to let Red

slide between 'em. And he pinned the ball to him so hard that Red turned over with a little "*Ooof!*" and lay still for a minute.

I got to him before the others.

"I'm sorry, Red," I said. "You did your best, I'll hand you that. Now beat it before McGill tries any strong-arm stuff!"

"You're a square guy, bo. S'long." And he stood not upon the order of his going, but skedaddled at once.

CHAPTER VI.

AND THEN—

IT was over—all over. The poor little girl had lost her club, her money, the pennant, and about everything else she had that was worth losing. I knew she'd be in line for solicitations, and I moseyed through the crowd to find her.

Oh! it was a sad crowd—too sad to kill the umpires. I found Ethel sitting all alone in the stand, staring over the heads of the mob at nothing in particular, and clasping and unclasping her little hands.

"I'm awful sorry—"

"Don't sympathize with me," she stamped. "I'll hate you if you do. I don't want sympathy."

Now I know I didn't have a bit of right to raise my eyes from her pretty face right then, but something disturbed my psychic innards. I looked up—and I saw Arthur Walters, treasurer of the club, beating it for the players' gate. And he had an expression on that foxy map of his that shouldn't have been on the face of any man who has just lost all of his club's available assets, including liabilities and pennant. I was gone in a jump.

"Where are you going?" wailed Ethel, showing signs of being her dear little, sweet little, weepy self again.

"Gumshoeing!" I called back. "Pitty-pat work. Wait there for me."

Somehow I managed to trail Walters, I guess I can thank the light-blue ribbon around his straw hat for that. And he

turned into the Elm Inn and went upstairs.

I followed and discovered that he'd gone into room 29. I hiked down, bribed a bell-hop with a two-dollar note to give me the key to 27, which was next door, and once in there I did some transom work. And I saw a hard-faced stranger with a checker-board suit count out so many hundred-dollar notes into little Arty's palm that I nearly had heart failure.

"I'm taking out three hundred commission," snarled the fat party.

"You said a hundred and fifty," protested Art.

"I'll make that four hundred," sizzled the stout guy. "And if you let out a yip I'll raise that ante and spill the dope about your betting *against* Elmville!"

It wasn't until a couple of hours later that I had time to sit down and think about how surprised I was when I got the lay of the land.

Of course it's all simple now. Art Walters had double-crossed Ethel Dale, worked hand-in-glove with Mike McGill so Elmville's defeat would be a sure thing. Then, for all I've been able to gather, I judge he was going to tell Ethel he'd come into a fortune, and count on her state of misery to induce her to take a matrimonial chance with him. It was a sweet little frame-up.

Right along there was where I put the finishing touches on my hero rôle.

Old Checkerboards beat it, and li' Arthur sat down to check up his cush. Sherlock Holmes Heston—that's I'm—slipped into the corridor, and then suddenly into the room. If Art had been a woman, and I'd been her husband, and you'd been the audience, you'd know you were witnessing the climax of a problem drama.

I smiled as sweetly as I remembered and held out my hand.

"About six thousand, I believe, Arty, old chap."

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about?" He tried to look innocent and belligerent

and surprised—well, he hit the last register, anyway; I'll hand him that much.

"For winning, of course," I said.

"But—but—I—we—"

"Now listen here, Mr. Arthur Walters, it strikes me that if you have any respect for that hide of yours, or for your liberty and otherwise untrammelled freedom, you'll hand that money over without another word. I'll even give you a receipt if you want it."

"This is a hold-up!"

"Sure. It's also a cinch. You can take your choice; hand that money over to me quietly and peaceable, or I'll take it from you by force and stick you in jail."

"It's mine."

"You're a liar, and you know it," I said politely. "You bet the club's money against the club, and as the club lost, you won. So fork over"—I remembered that nice word that McGill used—"pronto!"

"You'll keep quiet about it?"

"Nobody but Ethel will know, and I can promise you she won't tell. However, it wouldn't hurt the community any if you managed to make yourself scarce. And for goodness sake don't whine. I might forget I'm too happy to take a crack at you."

When I left that room I had more money about me than I'd thought there was in the world. And I took it to the ball park.

Ever see a ball park thirty minutes after the last game of the season? Say, it's about as cheerful looking as Wall Street, New York, at one A.M. Most parks, that is. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances. This was one of the times, and Ethel Dale was it—or should I say "them"?

I sat down beside her—she was tight-lipped, and brave as a Belgian—and without looking at her I started counting out a few piles of hundreds. And then I explained the whole thing to her. I'll spare you the details. Happy! Say, a lark was an undertaker compared to her.

And then I managed to work a sad and subdued nuance into my voice.

"If only he'd bet the other way," I moaned. "If only you were penniless!"

Of course we'd only known each other for a day, but that didn't keep those pinky cheeks of hers from signaling that she was hep to what I was driving at.

"I—s-s-s-sup-suppose-I was—"

"A poor man might have a chance— might have the nerve—"

Only the romantic mooing of two cows in an adjoining lot could be heard for about five minutes. And then, for the fourth and last time her chin set square and her eyes glowed.

"I hate men who haven't any nerve!" she flashed.

I guess she must have stopped hating me right there!

(The end.)

The Gambler and the Stake



"MR. BRENT."

Brent opened his eyes by degrees. He considered his valet dimly. "What time is it, Harwood?" he asked in a drawling voice.

"Eleven o'clock, sir. But Mr. Frederick Winton has called, and I thought you might care to make an exception in his favor. He is the gentleman you won the money from at Monte Carlo, sir, and I thought you might care to see him. He is very anxious about it."

"I don't remember him," said Brent, still with a drawling voice. "I won

money from a good many men at Monte Carlo, Harwood."

"Exactly, sir. But Mr. Winton is the gentleman from whom you won when all your money was gone. You told him then that you hoped the time would come when you could voluntarily return the favor which he had involuntarily done for you. I remember your words, sir."

"Very well," said Brent. "Raise the curtain, Harwood. This room is dim enough to put me to sleep again whether I will or no."

He drew himself up on one elbow

as the light slanted into the room, struck a glimmering reflection from the tall mirror, and glistened on the polished woodwork of the foot of the bed. It fell upon Brent, and showed a lean, pallid face, square chinned, with expressionless eyes.

He was one of those men who at thirty-five look twenty-five, and who at twenty-five might well be considered thirty-five. His face was unlined, save that, whether he waked or slept, there was the hint of a frown on his forehead and the suggestion of a smile about his lips.

He sat up on the side of the bed, put his feet into the softly furred slippers, and held out his arms to the dressing-gown which Harwood gave him.

"I begin to remember, Harwood," he said slowly. "This man Winton lost to me on two evenings—or was it three?—when I was flat."

"You played with him four afternoons, and two of the sessions lasted into the night," said Harwood. "You were quite flat. Afterward he entertained you on his yacht."

"Yes; I remember now. A good-looking fellow; rich American family; about my age?"

"I presume so, sir."

"Good nerve for cards until the stakes go high?"

"You told me to note him as such, sir," said Harwood.

"I am going to the bathroom for a shower. Tell him I'll be with him in five minutes, and ask him to excuse my negligée. Harwood, it's a strange thing that we sigh when go to sleep and groan when we wake up. Does it affect you in this manner?"

Despite the years he had spent in that service, Harwood could never quite make up his mind when his master was mocking him and when he was in earnest.

"I don't know," he answered, backing through the door into the reception-room. "I think I rarely sigh, Mr. Brent; I am quite sure I never groan, sir."

It seemed to Harwood when he closed the door that his master was actually smiling as he turned away toward the bathroom. He would have given half a month's pay to be sure, but he dared not open the door again without a proper excuse. Inquisitiveness, he had learned, was not desirable.

In a few moments Brent himself appeared. His face was still of the unusual pallor, but his eyes, though always expressionless, in some indefinable manner suggested a reserve strength of utter self-possession. He greeted Winton with an easy though unsmiling courtesy.

"I won't keep you long," said Winton, after they had passed the formalities of the greeting. "I'll get right down to business, since it is more or less of a business matter which has brought me."

He paused, somewhat abashed by the steady consideration of Brent's gaze.

"If the suggestion does not embarrass you," said Brent, "may I hope that you are about to give me an opportunity of returning the favor which you once did me?"

"Not a favor on my part," exclaimed Winton hastily. "Not at all. Of course I was doing my bitter best to outdo you at the cards, though you were good enough to say at the time that the opportuneness of your winnings from me placed you under a—under a—"

He came to a stammering halt.

"Under a personal obligation to you," said Brent quietly. "I was quite broke. My winnings from you were a godsend. I assure you that I still look upon the matter in that light. I hope this will make it easier for you to go ahead."

"It does," said Winton, feeling rather clumsily for his words. "Not that any obligation exists, you know, but since you have this Quixotic feeling about the thing, I thought—I thought—"

"Damn it all," he broke out, stirring in his chair, "this is most embarrassing; but the whole point is that I am about to ask you to do me a service of a very painful and personal nature."

Brent's face remained unchanged, but his voice took on a deeper and friendlier significance.

"My dear Mr. Winton," he said, leaning slightly toward his guest, "I give you my word that I am most eager to serve you. Please tell me in what way I may do so."

Winton cleared his throat and frowned spasmodically to fortify his resolution, but his gaze shifted to a corner of the room as he talked.

"Very well," said he. "This is the case. I will state it outright, and before I am through you will understand that I cannot be in the slightest degree offended if you refuse me your assistance. I am desperately in love for the first time in my life, and with a girl who likes me as a friend but will have none of me as a lover. I am determined to win her, and in that determination I cannot help remembering the old maxim—"

He stopped with an apologetic smile, and his eyes sought Brent's for an instant with an appeal for understanding.

"The old maxim that all is fair in war and love," said Brent. "Exactly. Please continue."

"Because," said Winton, "I think it is hard for a woman to make up her mind."

"When she has a mind," said Brent.

"Or to read her own heart," suggested Winton.

"There is generally nothing written there," stated Brent.

"Then why is it wrong to force their hands by right means or wrong?"

"It is not wrong," said Brent. "It saves them the trouble of thinking when they have nothing to think, and it supplies them an emotion when they have nothing to feel."

"By the Lord, Brent," breathed Winton, "you are a jewel of a fellow. Already my conscience begins to feel easy. I have always felt that a man can teach a woman to love him."

"Surely he can," said Brent, "just as a fire can always teach a mirror to give

back his reflection—unless the mirror is too dull. You can't warm your hands in front of the mirror, but on the whole it's a pleasant delusion."

"By Jove, you're a heartless chap," mused Winton.

"Not at all—merely reasonable," said Brent. "I think the metaphor holds. That's why marriages are unhappy. They get along well enough as long as the man is afire, but when the passion dies out on his side there is absolute darkness. The mirror has nothing to reflect, you see, until—the divorce court brings a ray of light."

"This is going a little too strong for me," said Winton. "You make me feel cold to the heart."

"I am sorry," said Brent. "I don't mean to discourage you. I love to see a man gather experience. Please go on with your story. It begins to have the lyric pulse."

"Very well," said Winton. "I have searched for a long time for some means of acquiring a controlling power over this girl. At last I have found one. Her great weakness is for her brother, who recently inherited the family estate, and his great weakness is a love for gambling."

"And that is where I enter the plot," said Brent without emotion.

"Exactly," said Winton; and his eyes again wandered to the corner of the room. "If you could meet this brother and play cards with him, I know that we would have him in our grip in a short time."

"He hasn't much money. His father left only a small estate, a little cash, and a country place up the Hudson, where the girl is now. A few nights of heavy losing would break him completely, I'm sure. Break him in every way, for the fellow has no heart, I'm positive. When his money is gone his nerve will be gone. He will think of suicide."

"Then we could step in and propose that he use his influence with his sister in return for the money he has lost. He

has a mean nature. I know he will do it; and I know she cannot resist the pressure he will put to bear upon her."

His wavering eyes leaped to Brent's face, and he half rose in a final appeal.

"Brent," he whispered, tense with the force of his desire, "will you help me in this thing? You are the one man who could do it. I know other gamblers, but none like you. This man is a celebrated hand with the cards himself. He wins largely. He might turn the game on me.

"But you never lose; and if you play with him you will madden him as you madden every one who plays with you. He will be led on by a desire to break through the strength of your surety, to make you frown, to make you flush with pleasure or anger, to see your hands shake the slightest moment.

"I know what it is. I have played against you. I know the excitement of the thing. He will be lost after the first hand. Brent!"

Brent reached for a cigarette and poised it a moment before he lighted it.

"I am going to do this thing," he said at last, and then waved aside Winton's enthusiastically extended hand of gratitude. "I am going to do this thing, though I confess that I hardly like the game. I have always played with the stakes in sight on the table; but it seems in this case that we are playing two hands against one and two stakes against one stake.

"It seems that we are going to get enough gold to balance against a heart, eh, Winton? Well, I suppose it can be done, if it's a woman's heart. And I promised myself to repay that favor. So here's my hand to see you through in this game to the best of my ability."

They shook hands silently across the table, and Winton flushed with excitement.

"There may be some trouble," went on Brent. "I am rather widely known as a successful and professional gambler. Perhaps this chap may take to cover when he sees me."

"No danger of that," exclaimed Winton. "Don't fear for that. He will be like the rest—like me—he will think that he is the man who will break your luck. The point is that it isn't luck. It is you. They think that 'Jack of Spades' is an empty name. By the way, how did you get that name?"

"I don't know," said Brent coldly, "save that it is supposed to be my lucky card and that my first name is John. I believe that no one has ever addressed me by that name—habitually."

"I beg your pardon," said Winton, "I didn't know it irritated you. If you can start this game this evening, I'll call for you in a car at eight o'clock. I know the place where Cransion plays nearly every night, and we'll go there. One thing more. I hardly know how to remunerate you for this favor, but—"

"There is only one way you can do it," said Brent as Winton hesitated. "Raise such a big flame that the mirror will actually seem to be on fire."

On the tenth morning following, the dawn of the May day lighted one by one the upper reaches of New York's skyscrapers and passed gradually down to the shadowy mass of the lower buildings, but in the gambling-rooms the glow diffused from the electric lights shut out the thoughts of day. Down the luminous vista of the apartment the round mahogany tables glimmered with golden brown reflections and sudden soft waverings of light as the players leaned forward to pick up their cards.

The silence was rendered only more intense by the low guttural of occasional voices and now and then the muffled tapping as a dealer shuffled his cards. And linking the entire scene together wound the smoke of cigarettes and cigars in thin, silver drifts and gray-blue coils; but for each group the rest of the rooms had long ago ceased to exist, save that around one table a little crowd had gathered, watching breathlessly the high play of two gamblers.

A little stir passed through the group around the table, then the breathless silence of expectancy held them. The dealer loosened his collar and leaned forward on his elbows. Herbert Cransion wrote a check with trembling hands. He was a handsome fellow, scarcely well into his twenties, and flushed now with wine and excitement he looked boyish.

"Call your five thousand and raise you five thousand," he said, and as he spoke his mouth twitched nervously.

The eyes of the group shifted from him to the man who sat opposite, John Brent, his face as colorless as ever and the hint of a smile on his lips. They were playing stud poker. In front of Cransion lay exposed the ace of hearts, the ace of diamonds, and the three of clubs. In front of John Brent lay the eight of spades, the seven of spades, and the nine of hearts. He reached into his wallet and counted out a stack of bills.

"Call your five thousand and raise you ten thousand," he said.

One of the bystanders, a heavily built man with a great expanse of shirt front, passed a nervous hand over his bald head. "Great Scott!" he whispered. "The man is betting on an incompleated straight."

Cransion half rose from his seat. "Silence over there!" he cried fiercely. "Let Brent play his own hand. Call your ten thousand and raise you ten thousand," he continued as he sank back into his seat; and he commenced to write again with a shaking hand in his check-book.

Brent drummed lightly on his buried card. The smile on his lips never changed. "Call your ten thousand and raise you twenty thousand," he said as he counted out the money.

The dealer commenced to wipe his hands on his handkerchief, and Cransion drew far back in his chair with a sudden expression of fear. A glance at the cards on the table, however, reassured him. He seemed for a moment as if he were about to utter some protest, then made

a strange gesture of abandon and wrote again in his check-book.

"Call your twenty thousand," he said in a somewhat stammering voice and pushed the check slowly toward the pile of checks and bills which lay heaped upon the table.

"Deal?" asked the dealer.

"Deal," said Brent.

"Cards up first," said Cransion. "It makes no difference, and I'd rather like to see this draw."

Without a word Brent turned up his buried card. It was the ten of diamonds. Cransion turned up the ace of spades. He rose in tremulous excitement.

"You need a jack to beat me and get your straight," he said, "and if I get another ace you're beaten anyway." He sat down and bit his lip. "Deal," he called.

The queen of diamonds flashed into the air and fell beside Cransion's cards. He caught a deep breath, passed a hand across his eyes, and then leaned forward to watch Brent's draw.

Again the dealer's hand moved, a card shone in the air, and the jack of spades fell beside Brent's hand.

Cransion's chair scraped loudly as he rose.

"Proprietor," he called, "I challenge this deal! I—"

As he spoke he reached suddenly forward and laid his hand upon the pile of money. Brent did not rise, but his hand fell lightly on his hip. The smile remained, and his voice came velvet smooth, but something in that purring sound made the group about the table draw back.

"Cards are a gentleman's game, Mr. Cransion," he said. "They were never meant for yellow dogs. Take your hands off the money, or I'll forget that you have a man's name and remember that you have a dog's heart!"

Cransion straightened as if he had received a blow, glared at Brent for a moment, through narrowing eyes, and then whirled and left the room.

Brent overtook Cransion in the reception-room, which was luckily empty.

"Mr. Cransion," he called softly.

Cransion turned and flushed sullenly when he saw his pursuer.

"Well?" he queried shortly.

"We are going into the library," said Brent. "I have something to say which will interest you."

He led the way as he spoke and passed into the library, where he took a chair. He knew that Cransion would hesitate and then follow.

"To-night finished your bank-account, Cransion," he stated without prelude when they sat facing one another.

For a moment Cransion stared at him defiantly, as if he were about to retort with some insolent phrase, but under Brent's impersonal eye his sullenness disappeared.

With one hand he covered his mouth to hide its nervous twitching.

"Finished," he said—"more than finished."

"Account overdrawn?"

"Yes. Oh, God, what a fool I have been!" he cried with a half-tremulous fierceness. "They told me who you were, but I dreamed—I dreamed that I would be the one successful man—I dreamed that I would become famous by breaking the nerve and the fortune of Jack of Spades."

He burst into hysterical laughter.

"Look at me now!" he exclaimed, sobering suddenly. "I am not half a man. I'm a shaking woman, and I've ruined every one dependent upon me. There's only one honorable way left to me. But why do I tell you this?"

"Because I'm going to show you a way out of this trouble," said Brent. "It's not a comfortable way nor a particularly honorable way, but I judge you are eager to get away from this embarrassment."

Cransion laughed shortly. "Eager? Dear God, man, tell me what to do, and it's done."

"Persuade your sister to marry Fred-

erick Winton, and I'll restore these checks to you as soon as the marriage ceremony is finished."

Cransion's face lighted and then went blank again. He seemed about to speak, but a growing frown took the place of words.

"Do I understand that Winton has set you on to do this?" he asked at last. "Am I a mere tool in another man's game? No, by Heaven, no Cransion has ever fallen so low as that, and I shall not be the first one. And yet—"

He buried his face in his arms and groaned.

"It is your one way out of the difficulty," said Brent, and the suggestion of a smile on his lips altered into a perceptible sneer. "If you have enough strength with your sister all will be well with you."

Cransion started to his feet. Under the stress of his emotions the wine-flush had died from his face and left it gray.

"You do not know her," he said bitterly, "or you could not make this suggestion. If she were an ordinary girl I might be able to do it; but she is a saint—a golden-haired saint. How could I say this thing to her and watch her eyes grow narrow with scorn? She would do it for me; she would make any sacrifice for me and to save the family place and name. But how in God's name can I talk to her of it?"

"By simply forgetting the golden hair and the possibility of scorn in the eyes," said Brent in his changeless voice. "I have no doubt that the color of her hair makes you think her an angel. But my dear fellow you must remember that the differences between women are surface differences. All hair, whether black or yellow, grows gray in time. All lips are apt to grow thin and wrinkled.

"If she were cross-eyed you would never think of her as an angel. When you talk with her try to picture her as she will be ten years from to-day. I have found it an excellent antidote against pretty women. The angelic part of

women stops with the glow and the bloom of youth. We imagine they have souls till the wrinkles begin to write something else on their faces."

"But she doesn't love him," said Cransion half to himself.

"All the better," said Brent. "Marriage is a business affair—a thing which begins with a business contract between two parties. Marriages which begin with the lyric impulse end in Reno. Romance, my dear Cransion, is the invention of poets, and is far better left to books.

"Far better that your sister should marry with her eyes unblinded by illusion. Lovers take happiness for granted and are horrified by disappointment. A marriage of convenience presupposes nothing but automobiles and a good cook. It is better to expect nothing and get a little than to expect everything and get a morning after."

"I can't do it," muttered Cransion, wringing his hands. "Dear God, I wish that I could!"

"Very well, then," said Brent. "Then you know what to expect. I will wait until the day after to-morrow. If I do not hear from you before then you may expect that the bank shall discover that your account is overdrawn; that you are faced with bankruptcy; that your family estate will be lost to you; that both you and your sister will be confronted with the long torture of poverty.

"Go home and think it over, Cransion. Listen to me. At first you will think of suicide; but when you look down the mouth of the revolver you will change your mind. You will remember the good advice I have given you and will decide to follow it. Now go."

He watched Cransion hurry from the room, and his sneer changed to as grim a smile.

"A rotten affair," said Brent softly. "Quite the rottenest you have ever mixed in, John Brent."

On the morning of the second day, as he was about to leave his apartment,

Harwood showed in Frederick Winton. His excited manner told Brent at once that all was well.

"The thing is done," cried Winton. "What a wonder you are, man! I shall never forget this! A letter came this morning, a long letter. Read it."

"I don't care to read your first—er—love-letter, Winton," said Brent coldly.

"By Jove," said Winton, "don't be so infernally cynical, Brent. This letter is so far from a love-letter that it gives me a chill. But that will pass. Man, I'll so surround her with affection that she cannot choose but give me back a small measure after a while.

"But what in the world did you say to Cransion? You must have given him a wonderful talk and a heartless one. Read the letter. It's all there, and it's from the lady herself, not from Cransion."

Brent took the fold of paper and spread it out with manifest distaste. The writing was in a running delicate feminine hand, and in spite of himself a little thrill of pity touched him as he read:

DEAR FREDERICK:

Herbert has talked with me, and that is why I write this letter. I cannot write it happily, but at least I can write it truthfully.

I am still a little dazed after that talk with my brother, and I feel strangely cold and a little bitter. He commenced by speaking to me of you, and pressed all your good qualities upon me. I know they are very many, and I have always liked you as a friend, liked you very sincerely; but friendship is so different from love. At least it is with a girl. To me it has always been something I have looked forward to as one looks forward to a brave to-morrow. They say it comes from little things, a remembered word, or a glance, perhaps; but I should have to take it to my heart and make it flower and grow strong through all my days.

If I find the dawn of reality cold and gray, waking from such a dream, will you forgive me?

I told Herbert these things, and he replied with strange arguments which may be true; but, oh, I still think they are not. He said that a girl's dreams stop with the glow and bloom of youth, and that only wrinkles can write true knowledge on their faces. And he said that it is far better to leave romance to poets; and many other things he said, which I knew did

not come out of his own mind. So I tasked him with it, and asked him if he had heard them from you, and at last he confessed that he had heard them from a man named John Brent, a professional gambler—what a heartless and terrible man he must be.

For when I refused to listen to his arguments, Herbert told me everything—how he had played with this gambler on ten nights, and lost everything—more than everything—to him; but how he played on and on, hoping to break the courage of this "Jack of Spades." And then he told me that he was ruined, and that the only thing left for him to do was to kill himself. So I sat there and felt the old order of my life die about me, and a new life close around me like a hand upon my heart. And then Herbert told me that I could save him and save the honor of our name by marrying you.

I will do this thing if it saves so much. A woman's dreams cannot weigh against such affairs. If you still want me, you can take me whenever you will.

At first I was rather bitter that you should have hired another man to win me and that I should go to pay a gambling debt; but I am trying to forget this, and to face necessity bravely and with clear eyes.

If I do not love you now, I will promise you very honestly to be true to you always, and in time, perhaps, I can come to love you.

Does this content you?

MARGARET CRANSON.

For some moment Brent kept his eyes upon the signature, and then he became aware that the cigarette had burned to his fingers. He tossed it into an ash-receiver and returned the letter to Winton in silence.

"You're right," said Winton. "There is nothing to say about such a letter. What a wonderful girl she is! And what a dirty hound I feel to torture her so; and yet—"

"And does it content you?" said Brent at last.

"Content me?" cried Winton. "Can you ask me that seriously? Do you suppose that a starving man will turn his back on bread and water? No, no! And I remember what you said to me the other day.

"You understand these things, Brent. You have seen men, women, and events of twenty nations. You understand life and human nature. You must be right.

A woman is like a mirror—and the fire of a man's love can fill her with light."

Brent walked across the room and stared out the window.

"Don't take me too seriously," he said. "It is the curse of our times that an epigram is taken for a prophecy. Our words are building-blocks. God knows we can build them into wonderful toy castles, but unless they are cemented together with vital emotion our thoughts lack substance, and the first wind of human passion will blow down our play-houses! Pah! I am growing old!"

He turned and faced his guest with a smile.

"Go sport with Amaryllis," he said. "This May-time is glorious in the 'country. The crocuses and the Dutchman's Breeches are out now, and there are all sorts of things to find in the woods. Go out to conquer, Winton. I wish you all happiness."

Winton considered him a moment with new eyes.

"Look here, Brent," he said suddenly, "why not come out with me? You won't have to bother with the people at the house. I know you like to be alone," he went on, noticing Brent's deprecatory shake of the head, "and there's a little lodge on my place about half a mile from the house. You can be absolutely alone there with your man. I'll give you a fellow to cook for you."

He laid a hand on Brent's shoulder.

"Come out where there's a real sun and a real wind and a real sky," he continued enthusiastically. "I'd love to have you. There's a piano in the lodge, and you can drum it to your heart's content."

"A piano?" said Brent.

"Yes; and horses to ride, and wonderful roads to ride them on, and automobiles waiting for you, and big lawns to be lazy on, and a smell of the woods that'll put new life in you."

"You remind me of an angel tempting the devil to be good," smiled Brent. "No more. I'll start to-night if I may."

He paused a moment, drumming on the table, with far-off eyes. "But the devil is sometimes uncomfortable company, Winton: Had you thought of that?"

Winton had not exaggerated the charm of his country estate. It lay far up the Hudson, on the banks of a small tributary river which wound lazily between wooded banks, and the estate itself stretched out running miles of undulating land, whispering groves, and broad, sunny lawns.

Brent gave himself wholly to the quiet charm of the place. In the evening he ate alone in his lodge, and during his supper he watched the slow dropping of the day through his window, the perpetual mystery of change when the life-radiant colors of the day fade and night sends her long shadows stalking before her like somber heralds who robbed the trees of their gaiety at a single touch and made them dark figures of ominous prophecy.

Then he sat at the piano and recalled old airs, touching them softly as if for fear of startling the listening evening calm. And later still he sat on the pillared veranda and heard the night winds touch the trees with the infinite caress of sleep. And late every night Winton came whistling down the path to sit with him a few moments and recount the adventure of the day.

The Cransion estate lay only a few miles up the river, and Winton laid steady siege to the heart of Margaret Cransion. He told of breathless automobile rides, and of the poised tea-cups at afternoon receptions, of dances, and haunting phrases of repartee.

Then Brent smiled broadly under the shelter of the dark and gave advice, and suggested entertainments, and sent his visitor away singing while he went back into the lodge and slept a not dreamless sleep.

For who shall deny the lyric voice of spring? Who shall take the scent of

early flowers and not consider the faint sadness of remembered perfumes? Who shall lie prone on the grass with the touch of chill wind on his face and the warmth of a full sun in his heart, without thrilling to the eternal gladness of living and the eternal sorrow of change? Who shall look on the stars without knowing the vanity of fact and the dear reality of dreams?

So it chanced that when Brent, standing under a willow by the river on a morning, heard the light drip of water from suspended oars, and looking up and saw a skiff take the bend close to the shore, and in the skiff a girl who smiled for the joy of the rowing and the splendor of the spring morning, he looked upon her not as a picture, but as beauty which had lived beyond the dream for the golden reality of wind and sun and laughter.

She had turned in the boat with her hands resting on the oars, and the sun lay white on her half-bared arms and on her throat and forehead and made a golden fire of her uncovered hair. He could never tell why he brushed off his hat as if even the shadow of its brim obscured his watching as she came floating down over the green and dun shadows of the river.

For as she came her smile grew out upon him, and the loveliness of wide, clear eyes, and now he heard the music of the ripple from the bow. Very near she was, breathlessly near.

Then the boat struck an obstacle, a submerged root, perhaps; but he never knew or cared. He only saw the skiff heel sharply to one side, heard her cry of alarm, saw her hand fall from the oar, and saw the oar slip into the water. In a moment the boat had righted itself, but John Brent strode into the water waist deep.

With one hand he caught the prow of the boat, and with the other arrested the oar as it floated down the current. And she, shrinking back a little from this sudden apparition, was aware of a pale,

stern face and eyes that burned strangely into her own.

As he handed her the oar she blushed, thanking him, and dipped her oars for a stroke which would have sent her farther out into the current and out of the life of John Brent; but when she made the stroke the skiff only surged a few inches forward.

She turned again and saw his hand grasping the prow strongly. She looked a moment longer and wondered at the cold suggestion of a smile upon his lips.

"The truth is," he was saying, "that I have been standing here, yearning for a boat in which I could row down the river. May I not row us both?"

She stared at him silently, but he watched a whimsical little smile grow at the corners of her mouth, and swung himself lightly into the skiff.

"If you will sit at the stern now," he said, "we will make excellent progress without fear of unshipping any more oars."

Partly because of the quiet command of his voice and partly because she wished to look him in the face to argue the question, she relinquished the oars and sat in the stern seat.

"But," she began, "you are dripping with water, and besides—"

She stopped as he sent the boat leaping toward the center of the stream with a great stroke of the oars.

"The sun is ample warrant that my wet clothes will dry in a few moments," he said, "and for the rest I know that we have not been introduced; but for my part I am not the least curious about your name, and I hope you will be satisfied if I admit that I am a man with two arms, two legs, and two eyes; and for my past history I will also confess that I have been born, have lived a life chiefly of eating, sleeping, and working, and am now about to—"

He broke off into a laugh, and she noticed that the sound was very low and that it broke off suddenly as if he were unaccustomed to it. She would have

remonstrated further, perhaps, but the flash and run of the sun on the water blinded her, and the strong movement of his arms gave her an unusual feeling of helplessness.

So she gave herself to strange thoughts, her chin resting on her hand, and the other hand trailing white in the water while she watched the shifting reflections of trees and sky move past her in the water with a musing smile.

On either side the woodland moved slowly back. The morning mist had not yet vanished, but floated against the trees in silver drifts, and veiled every inrunning of the shores with bright mystery. Deep silence everywhere as the great brown-trunked trees rolled past, a thousand points of light on the dew-dripping leaves—deep silence, save for the swirl of water round the oars and now and then the solitary splash of a fish, a startling and loud sound in that unusual quiet which almost left an echo in the air.

And as Brent grew warm to the pulling rhythm of the oars and the forward cadence of the skiff he fixed his glance upon her, on the glowing curve of her throat, till it was lost under the transparent wave of her shirt-waist, on the faintly cleft chin, on the lure of unconsciously smiling lips, on the shining eyes, until it seemed to him that his gaze drew upon her with an almost physical power, forcing her eyes up and up to meet his.

They did rise at last by fluttering degrees, and the hunger of his glance plunged into them, held them, grappled with the clear aloofness until the smile left his lips and she was gravely, almost tremulously, aware of him. And she said:

"I must turn back. See, we have come to the landing of the Winton estate. I must turn back, and I must go alone."

He stood upon the steps of the landing, and she drew away with a long pull of the oars. He ran down to the lowest step.

"Your name," he called. "I shall know your name!"

"It is Margaret Cransion," she answered; then, seeing the sudden stir of pain on his face: "And yours?"

The misted beauty of the morning went blank to him. When he raised his head he saw a little gap of blue water between the skiff and the foot of the landing. He could not let her float out of his life like this!

An impulse struck away his reason, and he ran down the remaining steps and sprang into the air.

If he had landed an inch or two more to one side he would have overturned the boat. As it was it rocked perilously, and her high-pitched outcry thrilled him back to common sense.

She sat with eyes wide with wonder and terror, shrinking as far as possible into the stern.

Brent laughed softly, a brooding sound which did not quiet her fears.

"When I heard your name," he explained, "I saw at once that I could not leave you so suddenly. I couldn't possibly out of mere politeness. You see, we have a mutual friend; and I'm sure that Frederick Winton would not approve if he learned that I had left you as unceremoniously as I was about to do just now."

He resumed the oars and headed the boat into the stream.

"But," she protested somewhat anxiously, "you are rowing the wrong way. You are going down-stream, and my place is up-stream."

"The longest way round is the sweetest way home," caroled Brent. "Besides, your place lies too near; we would arrive there far too soon. I should not have the time to ask the questions which I must ask of you, which I am in duty bound to ask of you as Winton's friend."

"But he will ask a great many more questions if I am late for lunch," she said, eying him a little dubiously.

He waved an inclusive arm to sky and river and trees.

"The whole morning pleads excuses for you!" he said.

She gave a little laugh of abandon, a low, delighted sound which ran upon his senses like the musical plashing of the ripples from the bow.

"Oh," she said; "I loathe convention. Row on. Why should I care whether or not you know Mr. Winton?"

"But I do know him," he assured her solemnly, "and suppose I should tell him that I had been rowing with you on the river, and then suppose that he should start to ask me questions, and suppose I could not answer them—now wouldn't that be embarrassing?"

"And what questions would you have to answer to Mr. Frederick Winton?"

She had turned her glance toward the shore, and he was so rapt watching the smile which grew softly around her mouth that it was a minute or so before he remembered his answer.

"As an old friend of Mr. Winton," he remarked, "I certainly will be expected to take a great deal of notice of his intended bride."

At this her glance came suddenly and coldly back to him.

"Yes?" she queried with polite disinterest.

"To be quite frank," he went on with more assurance, "Winton rather respects my taste, and he will be sure to ask my criticism of many things. You see it is up to me in defense of my reputation to make a sensible report."

"Of course," she admitted, regarding him with steady mockery. "And am I to be cross-examined?"

"You don't have to say a word," he declared. "Not a word. All you have to do is to be looked at."

She flushed a little at that and moved the hand on which her chin rested so that it hid the lower part of her face.

"I beg of you to help me out," complained Brent. "Consider that I must actually photograph you in my mind."

"I refuse to regard you as a camera," she said, smiling faintly.

"I assure you that I am as impersonal as one," he stated. "And consider the

woful degree of my present ignorance when I really can't say whether your eyes are black, blue-black, or blue. You will not look at me?"

She kept her gaze stubbornly down, but not without an effort. He could see the tinge of color grow along her throat, the hand tighten against her chin, and then her eyes went up to him suddenly as if she steeled herself to the act.

"And if you are Mr. Winton's friend, am I not to know your name?" she asked.

Under the shock of her eyes he knew that he was lost, utterly lost. It was as if every restraint of his life snapped. He gave himself to the freedom of tremendous movement with a great lift of the heart, as an eagle sits poised to every wind on the rock top, until he sees his prey and launches himself with one upward beat of his wings into the full current of the storm.

He had no care to guard his actions or his words. It were as if the river had gathered the purpose of his life into its current and were sweeping him on to an unknown destination.

"Your name?" she was repeating.

He caught a sudden breath and his face set to lines of determination.

"I will tell you a story instead," he began. "Do you mind?"

"By all means a story!" she cried.

"Very well," he began, and as he spoke his voice went cold and level. "This story has to do with an American, a rather young man of rather old family, and who repeated in his life the somewhat unsavory traditions of his forebears.

"For, you see, one of those forebears was a pirate in the days of Blackbeard—a venomous pirate with a cold heart. And this young man who is the hero or the villain of my story could not become a pirate, because they are so out of date, so he did the next best thing and became a professional gambler, and a very successful one."

She was staring at him now with strangely narrowed eyes, and her face

had become somewhat pale. He frowned to gather his thoughts.

"Now it happened that one day a friend came to our villain and asked him a favor. It seems that he was in love with a young girl who liked him as a friend but not as a lover, and he was determined to win her by fair means or foul, remembering that love, like war, justifies strange measures. He told our villain, the gambler, that the one weakness of the girl was for her brother, and that his weakness was for gambling; and he proposed that the villainous gambler entice the brother into a series of games and win away his fortune.

"Then he was to tell the boy that the one way he could redeem his lost estate was by forcing his sister into a marriage with the villainous gambler's friend."

"And you," said Margaret Cransion, her lips moving slowly as if they were numb with cold, "are the gambler—you are John Brent!"

But his glance seemed to travel through her and past her, as if he were so intent on his story that he did not notice her scorn or her shrinking.

"And all this happened as they planned," he went on, "and the girl was won; and when the man went out to woo the girl, to his country estate he took his gambler with him. And then a strange thing happened to the villain of the tale, for the quiet beauty of the May-time—for it was May—the sleeping airs of night, the hushing sounds of wind in the trees, the good warmth of the sun, the breath of the woodland flowers, entered into him, and he forgot his pirate ancestors; and it seemed to him as if he had become a little boy again, and it seemed also as if all his pirate life were merely ventures he had read in a book and would soon forget."

He half shipped the oars, letting the boat drift carelessly with the current, and the cynical smile changed and softened as he spoke. She would have spoken to break the charm of the spell which he seemed to gather around her as he spoke,

but her voice failed her, and she remained intent and half fearful.

"And it chanced that on a morning the gambler went down by the riverside, and as he stood there under a tree he saw a girl in a boat float around the bend of the river. She had turned in the boat, letting it drift, and as she grew out upon him with the sun blindingly white upon her throat and arms and making a golden fire of her hair, it seemed to the gambler that a new sense of beauty and a strange sense of pain and bitterness drifted into his life.

"So he stood and watched, and when the boat came near it struck some snags, and the girl cried out, and the gambler stopped the boat and righted it and returned the oar the girl had lost, and then he climbed into the boat himself and rowed down the river.

"But as he rowed the mysterious brightness of the morning and the glow and glimmer of woodland reflections on the river worked havoc in the gambler's heart. He hardly dared look on the girl; she was so beautiful it all seemed like a dream from which he dreaded an awakening.

"At last he stood on the steps of the landing of his friend's estate, and then the girl in the boat told her name. It was the name of the girl whom his friend was to marry, and the gambler saw that if he let the girl go then that she would drift out of his life, and he remembered that he had played once with this girl for the stake and that he had won her for another man.

"I say he remembered all this with great bitterness, and he decided that he would win her again and for himself. So he jumped back in the boat and rowed on down the current."

She was very pale now, and her eyes were strange as if with fear.

He continued in a changed voice:

"For the gambler had made up his mind to follow the footsteps of his sea-roving ancestors, and steal away this girl as his ancestors had stolen away gold.

But first he took out his wallet, as I do now, and he took from the wallet the checks which he had won from the girl's brother, as I do now; then he tore up the checks one by one, and tossed them into the river. (See how white they trail out behind the boat!)

"For he was determined that he would have no hold upon the girl save his love for her. Then he shipped the oars and leaned forward in the boat and he said to this girl:

"Margaret Cransion, I love you with my whole heart! Will you marry me?"

Suddenly his eyes grew burningly aware of her. He rose and sat beside her in the stern, and she drew back tremulous with fear and her eyes alive with something more than fear, her left hand raised to her breast as if to protect herself against him.

He caught the hand where it lay and circled her with his other arm. She would have protested, but when she looked up to his set face, paler than before, she forgot her words. She was aware now of the beating of her heart, and a warm force rose in her which she felt she must fight against without knowing why. She struggled to speech.

"God help me against you and against myself!" she whispered.

As if in answer to her appeal, a bird in the woodland by the river broke into song—a gay, trilling whistle, glad with the spirit of that May day, a song as bright as the sun which glinted on the forest leaves.

"Listen!" he whispered. "The music! It is speaking for me!"

The lilting pulse of the rhythm seemed to take the place of her heart-beats, and the blood ran with a tender pain like music to her heart, and ever his arm drew her closer, closer.

Her lips parted now, her face flushed delicately, and now and then her breath caught with an emotion wholly new.

"Do you hear?" he was saying. "Do you understand? It is more than my power which holds you so! More than

the voice of the music which holds us so. It is love!"

"No," she cried, with a half sob. "It cannot be! You are speaking empty words. We do not know each other. It is some enchantment. I—I—oh, this will stop when the singing stops!"

"But our hearts will not stop!" he said. "And the music will beat on in them. Dearest, can you deny the power and the glory of it? The singing is in our blood forever, love, love, love! I know it is strange and new. Beauty is forever strange and new, and love is both beauty and truth molded together to make an eternal singing.

"Margaret, Margaret, my golden-haired, deep-eyed Margaret, we are lost to ourselves and won to each other. Do you not know it? It is the morning which gives you to me! It is the silver drifting mist! It is the golden running sunlight on the river, and the green-and-dun shadows by the shore, and now through the silence the first breath of this high

song, as far away and faint as eternity. There is still a hope for me. There is a ghost of chance. I see it in the tremble of your lips. It makes a shadow of your eyes. Margaret!"

The singing stopped, and they sat with bowed heads. A listening silence came upon them. The bright wonder of the morning grew dim. The whole world lay at wait.

He tilted her face back until her hair touched soft and fragrant at his cheek, and the drooping eyelids wavered, rose, and suddenly he was drinking of the deep and misted wonder of her eyes.

"Dearest, I cannot help myself," she said, "for the river carries me away from my old life and into yours."

Now the bird in the woodland by the river broke again into the oldest of all songs, the song of songs which no man shall hear twice in his life; and a water-dog on a rock by the river basking in the sunlight opened his eyes to watch and raised his head to listen.



L O V E

(A Paradox)

BY D. DOUGLAS ROBSON

IT is the source of all evil,
 It is the source of all good;
 It is conceived by a devil,
 It is inspired by a god.
 There's nothing it is not, nothing it does not.
 It carries a blessing and taint;
 It makes of the saint a sinner,
 And makes of the sinner a saint.

It makes a fool of the prophet,
 It makes a sage of the ass,
 It makes the poor richer of it,
 And does not discriminate class.
 He's a fool who seeks it, a coward who shirks it,
 A traitor should suffer the brand;
 A man's a *man* who can keep it—
 But only a god can command.

The Squeeze Wheel

by E. K. Means

Author of "Diada, Daughter of Discord," "Two Sorry Sons of Sorrow," "Every Pose a Picture," etc.

HERE is exactly what Dr. Means thinks of this story in his own words: " 'The Squeeze-Wheel' is my most ambitious work. I claim for it that it is an absolutely accurate delineation of negro life and character, a truthful picture of the various activities of an all-negro village, with an atmosphere as Ethiopian as an African jungle; a tale woven of the comedy, tragedy, unreasoning terror, fatalistic courage, and senseless superstitions which are the texture of the negro's life."

This story differs from all that Dr. Means has written; indeed, in all probability from anything ever produced in the world by all its active authors, in theme, locality, characters, and atmosphere. We invite you to express your candid opinion as to whether you like it or not. Throw something at this tale—either a brickbat or a bouquet, such as you think it deserves!—THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

IN RAG-ROW.

"**Y**OU want forty dollars in silver?" the purser of the little steamboat Nackitosh exclaimed, as he looked at Lon Wafer through the little window.

"Please, suh," Lon grinned, as he laid four ten-dollar bills on the counter.

"But—it 'll weigh three pounds and be a hatful of money!" the purser protested.

"I favors money in small change, boss," Lon said. "Niggers don't complain when dey is overloaded wid deir own dollars."

The purser laid upon the counter eight stacks of silver, each containing five dollars, and grinned as he watched the

negro deposit the money in his clothes. Lon found that he had four pockets in his pantaloons, and he put five dollars in each of these pockets. He found that he also had four pockets in his coat and he put five dollars in each of these.

"Fawty dollars 'vides up even wid all my pockets, boss," Lon chuckled, when he noticed the white man watching him. "I kin balance de load puffleck."

Lon was a chuckle-headed negro with a good-natured face, and the purser thought it wise to utter a word of warning.

"When you get off this boat you hide that money in some safe place as quick as you can," he said. "You can't run around the streets of Rag-row with all that silver jingling in your pockets."

They 'll take it off you so fast you 'll feel yourself catching cold."

"I ain't gwine tote it long, boss," Lon grinned. "I'm fixin' to git married to a little rag doll in Rag-row, an' I wants to make a big money showin' befo' my gal."

At this announcement the purser looked up with a little more interest, gazing with curiosity at the colored man who was preparing to make the great adventure. He marveled that any woman would choose to marry this moon-faced, thick-bodied, long-armed negro with large, prominent eyes and woolly head, and good-natured, easy-smiling mouth; but he remembered at the same time that love is blind.

"What sort of girl are you going to marry, Lon?" the purser asked teasingly. "Is she pretty?"

"Naw, suh, she ain't such a awful good looker. Niggers ain't bawnd dat way. I never seed no nigger mammy hab her piccaninny's picture took wid de brat settin' in a wash-bowl 'thout no clothes on. Dey ain't bawnd pretty an' dey don't grow pretty, but us nigger mens picks one as soon as we is qualified to take 'em, an' Patter is soft-spoke an' she's got a kind heart."

"Is she educated?" the purser asked.

"Yes, suh. She kin talk like a banjo."

"I wish you good luck," the purser smiled as he turned away.

Then his eyes fell on something which gave him an idea. It was a cylinder about one foot long and eight inches in circumference, with a conical top and a long stick extending from one end. He held it up.

"Do you know what this is, Lon?"

"It looks like one of dese here sky-rockets to me," Lon muttered.

"It's a ship distress rocket," the purser answered. "Just like a giant sky rocket."

"Yes, suh."

"What time are you going to be married?"

"Dis afternoon at three o'clock."

"Going to have a dance, or some kind of celebration to-night?"

"Yes, suh."

"Well, now, listen: I think this distress rocket is just the proper fireworks to wind up the festivities. It throws off a bright blue light which is visible for twenty miles. It 'll make the guests at your wedding celebration think the biggest nigger in Louisiana has got married. Want to take it with you?"

"Shore!" Lon grinned delightedly. "Dat's jes' de proper caper!" Lon reached out eagerly, took the large aerial missile in his hands and examined it carefully. "Whut's dat writin' on dat tag, boss?" he asked, indicating it with his finger.

"That's an appropriate and beautiful wedding sentiment," the purser chuckled. "The tag reads: 'New regulation signal rocket for vessels requiring assistance.'"

"Dat sound like it might fit my case," Lon guffawed. "When a nigger gits in de mattermony boat, he don't know how soon he'll be shooting' sky-rockets an' bellerin' fer he'p."

The purser wrapped a newspaper around the head of the rocket and handed it to Lon. "Don't get so excited that you forget to fire the distress rocket, Lon," he urged.

"Thank 'e, suh. I won't fergit. I'll tote dis change keerful an' handle dis rocket cautious an' return right back wid my gal when de boat puffs up de bayou agin."

Lon was the only passenger to disembark at the all-negro town called Rag-row on the banks of the Bayou Goulash, a stream half a mile wide and deep enough to accommodate any Mississippi river steamboat:

The steamboat seldom stopped at this point, and Lon was disappointed in not having a crowd to see him climb off of the big shiny boat. A few negro boys ran down to the landing, but they had eyes only for the boat, not for the passenger. A number of hound dogs loped down to the levee, but even these barked at the boat and not at the man.

Lon watched the boat until it disappeared from sight around the bend. Then

he slipped his rocket under his arm and felt all his pockets. He had not had so much money on his person for a long time.

"Tain't resomble fer a nigger to go right straight to his gal's home wid all dis money an' hand it over to her," he muttered. "I been a humble-walker in life fer a long time—now I's gwine put on dog an' succulate aroun' a little an' let somebody see me wid dis change." With this idea, he wandered aimlessly up and down the river front until noon.

The town called Rag-row consisted of two streets, each running parallel with the Bayou Goulash for one mile. There were about fifty houses, all but four being fragile one-story shacks.

Rag-row occupied a portion of what had once been a fertile and prosperous plantation, owned by a man who had made a fortune out of its productive soil. But a crevasse in the levee during the June rise five years before had covered the plantation with water forty feet deep. When the water subsided, it was found that a deposit of sand had formed over the plantation from two to twenty feet deep, and half a mile in the rear of the levee a big lake of water had settled.

The planter sorrowfully bade farewell to five hundred thousand dollars worth of property and moved away from the place which had become a sandy desert and a lake.

Negroes moved in and occupied the abandoned houses; in the course of time other houses were built, and now the negroes had a village of their own with five hundred inhabitants.

"De good Lawd made a nigger town here because de land warn't fit fer nothin' else," Lon muttered disgustedly, as he surveyed the village. "Ef dis Rag-row wus heaven I'd shore commit a life of sin. I's don't wanter come here when *I* dies."

At one end of the town there was a big, barn-like church; at the other end there were four two-story houses. Lon started at the church and walked slowly up the principal street. All of the houses were

just alike. Each sat back in a yard which was heavily shaded by chinaberry trees, a tree beloved by the Southern negro for its thick, umbrella-like shade. The ground around each house had been scuffed perfectly slick and was a dark-brown color, worn smooth by the feet of piccaninnies and the pads of hounds, and resembled an old derby hat with the nap worn off.

Every house had a wide porch in front with the railing broken in places and rickety everywhere. A wide open hallway, with rooms on either side, led to another porch in the rear of the house.

At one side of each house there was a well with a battered bucket attached to a ragged rope mended with pieces of wire. By each well there was a big iron wash-pot, always half-full of green, soapy, poisonous-looking water which no one had had energy enough to pour out. In the rear of the house there was a pig-pen, a small garden-plot overgrown with weeds and the fence broken down; sometimes a scrub cow chewing her cud under a cowshed with the roof gone from it.

In front there was always a fence, the gate hanging on one hinge and always spread hospitably open; the fence constructed of odds and ends of wood picked up along the river front when the water was high; and always a portion of the fence was down flat on the ground.

Around every cabin a large number of negro babies frolicked, some of them utterly devoid of wearing apparel; and countless hounds lay under the trees, and crawled under the houses, and leaped out of the weeds and shrubbery and came belling to the front at the least unusual sound.

Without exception every shack, even the big, barn-like church, was set up on high foundations to keep out of the overflow when the spring rise occurred.

"I wouldn't live here reg'lar fer half a hawg," Lon commented. "Anybody kin hab dis town dat wants it. It smells like a sick drug-store."

The warning of the steamboatman had made Lon cautious and he did not display

his money. He merely enjoyed the weight and feel of it. Its possession gave him a sense of power and independence, so he asked fool questions of the negro loafers along the levee, talked to them in loud and authoritative tones, and otherwise derived great happiness from his wealth.

When noon came, he sauntered into the Hot Dog eating-house, one of the two-story buildings in the town, and invested twenty-five cents in a meal consisting of fried catfish, sweet potato, watermelon, apple-pie and coffee.

While waiting for his food, Lon looked around him.

On the outside of this building there was a yellow water-mark indicating the height of the flood five years before. Inside, the restaurant resembled nothing so much as the inside of a mud scow. The walls were yellow and deeply stained with mud; rusty nails were driven all around the room to hang the coats and hats of the patrons, a half dozen tables with four chairs at each were in the middle of the room, and at the far end was a long bench before a counter for the quick-lunch diners.

Hounds stopped to sniff inquiringly at the front door, hungry hogs grunted impatiently at the rear door, and within the room the flies swarmed like an Egyptian pestilence.

"I tole Patter dat I would arrive down on de steamboat an' hand her fawty dollars," Lon murmured to himself as he consumed his meal. "But dat sweet gal owes me two bits fer de job of totin' dat heavy money aroun' all dis mawnin'. She won't miss dis two bits when I piles all dis yuther loose change cash in her lap. Mebbe I kin rake off 'bout as much as a dollar 'thout her noticin'. White folks specify dat love is blind, but I done expe'unce dat a nigger gal kin see a dollar as fur as she kin perceive de moon."

At a table opposite sat a tall, yellow negro, whose face bore distinct marks of Spanish blood and whose florid clothes represented many colors of the spectrum. His chair was tipped back against the

wall, he smoked a vile Perique stogie and he kept his Panama hat on his head.

"Dat furin-looking nigger act like he might expeck a call to go somewhar in a hurry," Lon commented. "He ain't figgerin' on leavin' his pan-cake hat."

At the same table with the Panama-hat negro was a black man whose clothes were old and ragged and as rusty as a tin can; whose features were coarse and ugly and whose thick lips habitually carried a vicious sneer. Lon watched this man curiously, noticing that he carried a large, square-shaped package and seemed very solicitous about it.

"I bet dat nigger ain't got nothin' but a shirt an' a collar in dat box," Lon thought. "He shore is skeart he'll mislay his change of dude clothes."

When Lon finished eating and pushed his chair back and began to smoke, the two men, without waiting for an invitation, came over and sat down at the same table with him.

"You don't object to get acquainted wid two neighbors, does you?" the Panama-hat negro asked.

"Naw, suh. My name is Lon Wafer."

"Glad to meet yo' 'quaintance, brudder," the tall yellow man responded. "Dey calls me Tax Sambola, an' dis little pout-lip nigger wid me is named Augerhole."

"Whut does you two cullud pussons do fer a livin' in dis town?" Lon asked politely.

"Don't our names signify nothin' to you?" Tax grunted.

"Naw. My edgocation is done been neglected recent."

"Whar you been at?" Augerhole asked.

"I owns a little piece of land an' a cabin up ferninst de Bucktail plantation an' I been wuckin' fer my own satisfaction."

"Dat accounts fer it," Tax Sambola said, nodding to Augerhole. "Eve'y nigger in Rag-row knows us an' he'ps us in our trade."

"Whut am yo' trade?" Lon asked again.

"Us operates a luck spindle," Tax Sambola told him.

"Dat word don't 'lucidate nothin' to me," Lon grinned. "Gib us mo' light."

Tax looked at Augerhole and grinned.

"Less take him up wid us an' 'nisheate him," Tax said. "Less learn dis here big tar-baby some new parlor tricks."

"I favors it," Augerhole snickered. "It's 'bout time de cong'gation wus 'semblin' togedder at de meetin'-house."

"Come wid us, brudder," Tax invited cordially. "It's plum' teetotal igernunce not to know mo' dan you does."

"I got a date wid a little gal an' I cain't stay wid you-all long," Lon remarked.

"Tain't fur to walk," Tax replied. "An' most of our friends leaves real soon an' plenty sorry. Less git us one of dese here tin-foil seegars—dis Perique stogie I'm suckin' is de wust smoke dat kin be boughten fer any money."

CHAPTER II.

THE LUCK SPINDLE.

TAX SAMBOLA and Augerhole conducted Lon up one of the dirty, ill-smelling streets. Scores of half-nude piccaninnies played along the narrow paths and countless hounds yelped at their heels. Barrels and boxes and piles of trash lay along the way. Old dilapidated frame houses, with the yellow water-mark around each of them, swarmed like beehives with three or four families in each house, and hummed like a cotton-mill with the clatter of conversation.

A few small stores lay along their path, the proprietor of each store sitting in the middle of the door asleep, with an open jack-knife in his hand and a pile of shavings at his feet, showing what broke him down.

Trees, flowers, vines, all neglected, grew in the yard, and rank weeds grew in the street. Numberless paths led across the yards to greater sights of dilapidation and decay in the rear.

Swarms of flies followed them in their progress, wood-ticks dropped upon them from the weeds and undergrowth, while from the ground scores of fleas leaped up to get their noon-day meal.

"Dis is a bad town fer fleas," Tax Sambola remarked, as he paused to scratch his shin. "Dey is so thick dat ef you pick up a handful of sand, de fleas will kick it outen yo' hand in a minute."

At length Tax and Augerhole stopped at a two-story house situated on a corner, entered the door and climbed the stairs. At the head of the steps they entered a large room where fifteen or twenty negroes were assembled. A brown-skin negro named Slack Frame sat at the side of a rickety table, and the crowd was packed closely around him.

"Make yo'self at home, Lonnie," Tax said, as he removed his coat and hung it on the wall. "I got to get busy wid dis game."

Lon walked over and placed his big sky-rocket in the corner of the room where nothing could harm the wedding present which the white man had given him.

Looking around, he saw that the big room was almost bare of furniture. About two dozen chairs sat around the walls, the seats of some of them bagged down and broken like an old basket, others mended and patched with slats of wood or woven wire or cloth. A little table occupied the center of the room, and this was also the center of attraction.

"You tryin' yo' luck too, pardner?" Slack Frame asked. He had surrendered his place at the table to Tax Sambola and was standing beside Lon. "Dis luck spindle is shore a nice game."

"Don't know nothin' mo' 'bout it dan a infunt baby," Lon replied.

"Git busy wid de game, Tax!" several impatient voices exclaimed.

Every one who has attended a country fair has seen the device which Tax Sambola was now preparing to operate. The gamblers call all such devices "spindles." It was in the shape of a wheel. A big pin like a clock-hand revolved around a

circle which was spaced off for prizes—ten dollars in one space, five in another, a dollar in others, a lot of blanks, four spaces marked "conditional" and one marked "lose."

The wheel goes around; wherever the little indicator at the point of the pin stops, there is your gain—or your loss.

Fascinated, Lon Wafer joined the crowd around the gaming table.

The crowd was gay and jocular and the sound of their revelry floated out of the open windows and echoed back from the walls of an abandoned cotton-shed on the other side of the street. Augerhole picked up a banjo and sang in a loud, snarling voice all the popular tunes of the day.

"You shore kin conjure wid dat banjo, Augerhole," Lon grinned.

"Suttinly," Augerhole agreed. "Dis here is a real banjo—'tain't no little tinkle-tank. 'Twas made by a cross-eyed nigger outen de wood of de blue-gum tree."

While Lon listened to the music he watched the play.

"It's one dollar per throw per each, niggers!" Tax Sambola chanted. "Put yo' dollar down on de one-dollar space an' ef you wins you git yo' dollar back; put her down on de five-dollar space an' you git five dollars back; put her down on de ten-dollar space an' you gits ten dollars back. It's all plum' easy an' rests yo' mind whenever you makes a winnin'!"

A big negro whom Lon had seen before traveling on the steamboats on Bayou Goulash placed a dollar on the five-dollar space and lo! the indicator stopped at the five; he left his winnings on the same space, and at the next turn of the wheel, he raked in twenty-five dollars!

"Dat's enough fer me, niggers!" he exulted, as he pocketed the money. "I quits ahead of dis game."

"Place yo' bets!" Tax Sambola called sharply; and while they were complying with this command, no one noticed that the big negro handed his twenty-five-dollar winnings to Augerhole as he passed out of the room.

"'Twouldn't be no trouble fer a nigger to git injudicious standin' aroun' a wheel like dis," Lon Wafer remarked to Slack Frame, as he gazed with popping eyes at the broad, receding back of the winner of twenty-five dollars.

"Dis luck spindle gits 'em all soon or late," Slack laughed. "I got to go home now an' git my rest, but I shore wish I could be aroun' when you haul back an' bust de hitchin'-strap an' git to playin' high."

"It's easy as suckin' eggs," Lon remarked.

"Dat's right," Slack laughed. "'An' it's mighty hard to break a houn' from suckin' eggs when he once gits started."

He patted Lon encouragingly on the back and took his departure.

"You niggers is jimmyjinks!" Augerhole snarled as he laid aside his banjo and shouldered his way through the crowd to a place at the table.

"Whut am dat?" Lon Wafer asked.

"It's a nigger whut's skeart to play lucky wid his luck," Augerhole snorted as he placed a silver dollar upon the space marked "10."

The crowd watched with breathless silence. The wheel stopped at ten.

"Let her go agin!" Augerhole snarled as he stacked his money upon the winning number. "When I comes squanderin' aroun' I ain't no jimmyjinks!"

The number ten won again!

"Let her go agin!" Augerhole howled.

"Nothin' doin'!" Tax Sambola snapped. "One hunderd dollars is de limit win in dis house. Git away an' let some yuther niggers earn deir livin'!"

"Huh!" Augerhole grunted. "I don't keer. Dis am de bigges' wuth of my money ever I did git—one hunderd dollars fer one!"

Augerhole pocketed his winnings, sat down, and began to pick at his banjo. A few minutes later, unnoticed, he slipped over and placed his winnings in Tax Sambola's hip-pocket.

About that time the thirty-nine dollars and seventy-five cents in Lon Wafer's

pocket began to burn like fire. He felt that he was simply compelled to take some of it out and lay it upon the magic wheel to cool off.

"Ain't you tried yo' luck yit, mister?" a stranger asked.

"Naw, suh," Lon replied half sadly. The idea was growing in his mind that it was his duty to play the wheel and earn a large sum of money so that he and Patter could start to house-keeping in style. He had worked all the year on his little place, had sold his cotton for forty dollars, and had brought that puny, insignificant sum to her. But here at this wheel, he could win one hundred dollars in a few minutes, and do it like Augerhole with an outlay of only one dollar.

That is, he could if he were not a jimmyjinks, so Augerhole said.

"Git outen de way an' lemme be a spote," the stranger requested. "I hopes I kin go out as puffed-up an' pride-blowed as dat yuther nigger winner."

Lon moved back and saw the stranger place a dollar on the five and win five dollars.

"Number ten ain't win since dat banjo-picker played it," the stranger muttered as he placed a dollar on the ten. "I got five good chances to make a killin' 'thout losin' any of my own money."

Thereupon each of the five dollars went back into the hands of the impassive Tax Sambola, and Lon's friend dropped out a complaining loser.

"I got my horns knocked off because I didn't quit soon enough," he whined. "Of co'se a ole black billy-goat like me ain't got no prudence or sense."

But the winners did not quit. They pressed their luck, and expressed their good fortune with loud shouts of rejoicing.

Then Lon Wafer fell from grace. He timidly placed a dollar on the ten—and lost it.

His loss was a distinct shock to him. He jerked back from the wheel with a start of surprise as if the wheel had snapped at him like a vicious dog.

He stood for a moment in deep thought. He had promised Patter that he would have forty dollars for their wedding; now the sum had been reduced one dollar and twenty-five cents. Of course he could explain to her that he had spent that on his trip to Rag-row; but he was sure that it would be better to win what he had lost on the wheel and avoid explanations of a shortage.

He smiled feebly and reached for another dollar.

"Dat ten is bounden to come some time," he reasoned to himself. "Dat pointer cain't miss it ferever. I's gwine play fer dat number."

In five minutes Lon was the heaviest plunger at the table.

One by one the dollars came out of each pocket in his trousers, and when these pockets were empty he knew that he had lost twenty dollars.

"Lawd!" he sighed as he backed away from the wheel for a breathing spell. "Dat little needle pesters all aroun' dat ten, but it ain't stopped dar a single time."

He walked away from the table to a window and leaned against the frame, looking out for a long time across the sandy flats with unseeing eyes. It seemed to him that the temperature of the room had risen many degrees, for every pore of his skin was a spouting fountain of perspiration. His mind was filled with anxiety over his losses, for he realized that he had a place for every dollar of the money he had brought to town for his wedding.

"Ef I could jes' win dat ten two times, dat would gib my lost twenty dollars back agin," he reasoned. "As soon as I rest my luck a little, I's gwine try her agin—dar ain't nothin' else to do."

Half a dozen negroes in succession took Lon's place and tried their fortunes on the number ten.

"It 'pears like dat number am powerful shy," one man proclaimed. "It's jes' blegged to come some time. Here she goes agin!"

Every man who tried that number final-

ly fell away from the table and then Lon returned.

"I knowed you wus comin' back, Lonnie!" Tax Sambola laughed. "Gamblin' is secont nacher wid a cullud man, an' you is as cullud as de Lawd could stain you wid his tar-bucket. Place yo' bet!"

"I bets on de ten," Lon replied, as he reached for a dollar in the pocket of his coat.

Nineteen times in succession Lon reached for a dollar, taking it out of some pocket in his coat while the rest of the crowd retired from the wheel to wonder and admire.

"Dat nigger's got money in *all* his pockets!" the admiring voice of a spectator exclaimed.

"He's got de dropsy, too!" another voice declared. "He's lettin' all dem dollars drop."

When Lon had emptied two of his coat-pockets, he stopped again. Thirty dollars were gone—three-fourths of his year's toil and sweat. For twelve months he had plowed and planted, and hoed and chopped, working in the cotton-field with hope in his heart. In imagination he saw Patter in his lonely cabin, saw vines growing over the porch, and flowers in the little yard. Dreams of happiness had sustained him through hours of weary toil, and now he faced tragedy and heart-break.

"I got to win!" he said stubbornly. "Dar ain't no hope fer me onless I wins."

He returned to the wheel and emptied another pocket, and in a little while he had risked and lost his last dollar.

Stubbornly he laid fifty cents on the ten.

"Nothin' doin', Lon," Tax Sambola remarked. "We takes nothin' but dollar bets."

"I ain't got no more dollars," Lon said in a voice which sounded in his own ears as if it had come to him over a long distance.

"Lawd, dat nigger is done played de ten plum' to bustrupsy!" an awed voice exclaimed.

"Dey done got eve'ything but his gal-lus-buttons!"

"He done loss eve'ything but his appetite!"

"Ain't he a sticker!"

"Cut out all dat!" Tax Sambola exclaimed sharply. "Let dis here spote put sand on his own fingers an' ketch his own snake by de tail!"

"I ain't got no more dollars!" Lon repeated desperately.

Sambola considered a moment, then he said:

"It's agin de rules, Lon, but I'll spin fer yo' fo'bits bet. You has been powerful lib'ral, an' I might as well take it all."

At that moment it seemed to Lon that he had gone both blind and deaf. He could hear a confused hum of voices, but could not understand what was said. He could see a table before him, but could not distinguish the numbers on the wheel. His dry tongue rasped against his teeth like sandpaper, and his hands and feet felt heavy as if weighted with lead.

The wheel stopped.

"Lost!" the crowd murmured. Lon could not hear them, but he fumbled mechanically in the pocket of his coat.

He placed a twenty-five-cent piece upon the ten. Without a word Tax Sambola spun the wheel.

Lost!

Tax Sambola had it all.

"You niggers is all jimmyjinks!" the snarling voice of Augerhole broke the silence.

"Whut am a jimmyjink?" Tax Sambola asked in a sharp tone. "Ef you want do any cussin', you come right out wid it!"

"It's a nigger whut ain't got money enough to play lucky wid his luck till he wins!" Augerhole snarled, glaring at Tax Sambola. "You jes' watch me!"

Amid the breathless silence of the crowd, Augerhole placed ten dollars upon the space marked ten.

The wheel spun, the crowd watched.

There was a deafening shout! Number ten had won!

Lon Wafer walked out, staggering like a drunkard.

CHAPTER III.

LON FINDS A FRIEND.

LON stopped on the street in front of the gambling-house, leaning weakly against the wall. In all his simple life no such tragedy had marked his career, and he did not know what to do or where to go. When at length he recovered his composure somewhat, his dazed eyes saw something on the opposite corner which he could comprehend—a low, frame building with a shed extending over the sidewalk on two sides, and half a dozen barrels lying in the sun in the rear.

"I better go over to dat saloom an' think a way outen my troubles," he muttered. "Dat luck spindle shore ain't no pious game."

He entered the dark, cool room and sat down at a table. A big, black negro, who looked like a retired prize-fighter, with a scarred and broken face and too much fat on his body, came over to him and asked:

"Whut's yourn, cullud pusson?"

Lon opened his mouth to speak. Then it dawned upon him that he was dead broke. The thought appalled him, and he sat like a stone image, staring at the barkeeper, his mouth still hanging open.

"Don't leave de cover offen yo' talkin'-machine dataway," the barkeeper growled. "You'll ketch cold in yo' inside works. Shet yo' mouth an' tell me whut you wants to drink."

"I ain't drinkin' nothin'," Lon sighed miserably. "I's busted."

He rested the side of his face on his hand and his mouth fell open again like a trunk. The saloon-keeper sat down on the other side of the table and looked at him.

To him Lon bore every mark of a country negro, one whose life consisted of eating, drinking, sleeping, and plenty of hard work. He was better dressed than most farm-laborers, but of course the saloon-

keeper did not know that Lon was dressed for his wedding.

"Whut busted you up, son," the saloon-keeper asked.

"I bet on a luck spindle in dat house acrost de street an' dey took eve'ything but my pants an' my vaccination scar," Lon said bitterly.

"Mebbe dey'll come over here an' take dem away from you yit," the barkeeper said encouragingly.

"Luck wus wid de yuther nigger!" Lon mourned.

"Of co'se!" the saloon-keeper bellowed. "Ain't you got no more sense dan to buck up ag'in' a squeeze-wheel?"

"A—which?" Lon asked.

The barkeeper looked at Lon with mingled pity and contempt. Then he rose heavily to his feet and walked to the bar, poured out two glasses of liquor and set them on the table.

"My name is Conko Mukes, stranger," he bellowed, as he held out his hand. "Name yo'se'f an' drink dis dram, an' mebbe I'll learn you somepin you ain't know. But fust drink dis one-night trouble-cure dram!"

"I's Lon Wafer," Lon muttered, as he sipped the liquor. "Whut am a squeeze-wheel?"

"It's somepin to rob igernunt niggers wid," Conko rumbled. "Dar ain't no chance to win again' it at all."

"Some folks winned," Lon protested.

"Suttinly," Conko Mukes growled. "Dey winned when Tax Sambola wanted 'em to win. He pressed de button an' de pointer stopped right—ef he wanted it to."

"I don't ketch on!" Lon exclaimed.

Conko looked at Lon for a long time as if he were some kind of unknown insect which had crawled into his place of business. Then he said:

"Gosh billy! You is all right from yo' neck down, but yo' head ain't never gwine gib you no trouble—you ain't got no use fer it. You is plum too young to be loose from yo' mammy. Now, listen!"

Thereupon Conko imparted some illu-

minating information to Lon Wafer about spindles. He explained that the wheel stopped just where the operator wanted it to stop. A clutch under the table guides the movement, making the wheel go fast or slow, and a knob or push-button, under the table where the operator can press it with his knee, or on top of the table where the operator can rest his elbow, or on the edge of the table where he can push it with his hand or his body, determines exactly where the little indicator shall point when it stops.

"Yes, suh, dat merry little luck-wheel goes aroun' to jes' perzackly whar de operator wants her to," Conko Mukes concluded.

It took a long time for Lon Wafer's dazed mind to comprehend the full significance of this explanation, and he had to ask many questions and have Conko repeat himself many times. At last he sat in wondering silence, pondering the calamity which had come into his life.

"I's been one of dese here cuss-word fools!" Lon Wafer mourned.

"Dar ain't no fool like a dam'fool," Conko Mukes readily agreed.

"I's been robbed!" Lon mourned.

"Suttinly," Conko Mukes declared. "Whut you gwine do about it?"

Lon had not had time to consider this, so he remained silent, thinking. Conko arose and refilled their glasses, bringing two large cigars, and laying them also upon the table. Finally he grew impatient.

"Whut you gwine do?" he repeated.

"I wants my money back."

"How you aim to git it?"

"I dunno," Lon sighed. "Some niggers kin play a fiddle or pick a banjo an' pass de hat. Some niggers kin dance an' sing an' pick up plenty money doin' dem tricks. I knowed one nigger dat could sleight-of-hand an' take nickels outen a nigger's y-ear—but me, I don't know no tricks like dat. I couldn't take de core outen a meller apple—I ain't never had no real useful edgagation."

Conko listened with contemptuous

amusement. "Mebbe some of yo' friends could he'p you," he suggested.

"I ain't got no frien's but myse'f." Lon lighted a cigar and puffed gratefully while he continued to think. The liquor was gradually reviving his spirits. He looked around him with more interest than he had shown since he entered.

It was a long room, filled with tables and chairs, with two doors in the rear entering into another room. A few cheap, gaudy lithographs hung upon the wall, the floor was sprinkled with sand, dozens of boxes filled with sawdust and used for cuspidors were in the room, and there was a long bar made of pine across one side.

"Mebbe you could earn yo' money back agin by wuckin' at some job," Conko suggested.

"'Tain't possible, Conko," Lon sighed. "Dat was de mostes' money I ever had on me at one time, an' Heaven don't never gib a nigger two pieces of pie."

"I reckon dey played hoss wid you an' currycombed you good," Conko remarked sympathetically.

Several times Lon had been on the point of telling Conko of his greater trouble—the fact that he was expected right then at the home of a young lady whom he had promised to marry. He wanted some friend to whom he could confide, but he was too ashamed of his conduct to confess to the worldly-wise Conko Mukes.

"Whut time is it, Conko?" he asked gloomily.

"It say three o'clock on my dewberry watch," Conko announced.

Lon sank into a state of deepest melancholy. Conko brought him more liquor, offered him fresh cigars as quickly as the one he smoked was burned out, and tried by various methods to get Lon to talk. But Lon had something on his mind.

After a long time, Conko made the remark: "Money ain't nothin' to worry about—you don't neber hab it long enough. Smile an' fergit it!"

"I ain't studyin' 'bout no money," Lon replied. "I got yuther troubles—an' I ain't got no more smile in me dan a ham."

Conko mutely passed him another cigar. Lon lighted it and remarked:

"I figger dat I is a plum' bob-tail fail-ure as a nigger—I oughter go somewhar an' learn how to be a Injun."

"Why don't you be a Injun right at home?" Conko asked, puckering his eyes and looking at Lon shrewdly.

"How?"

"Fight fer yo' rights!" Conko grumbled.

For a moment a flash of anger glowed in Lon Wafer's eyes over the wrongs he had suffered. Conko Mukes, watching closely, observed it with a secret satisfaction. The ex-prize-fighter looked with grim approval upon the young man whose farm-trained muscles were like oak and iron.

"I'll nght!" Lon muttered.

"I know you is gwine fight, but I axes you how?" Conko said.

He awaited an answer to this query with a great deal of interest, and when it came he snorted with disgust.

"I dunno," Lon said. "I don't reckon dey'll gimme my money back."

Conko's eyes again measured the width of Lon's shoulders and the reach of his arms and the strength of his work-hardened body.

"You don't look like a nigger whut'd take yo' loss so onpertickler," Conko suggested. "Cain't you think of no way to fight 'em?"

"I done got such a bump it 'pears like I cain't git my mind togedder," Lon said miserably. "Mebbe I kin think up a revengeunce atter while."

"Dat's de way to aim," Conko applauded. "Git back at 'em. Don't tell nobody whut you is fixin' to do, but when de time comes, rub 'em up hard!"

During most of this conversation a scar-faced, brown negro had been industriously polishing the glasses behind the bar and listening. He now came forward to get the two empty glasses.

"Dis here man is named Bunk Beard, Lon," Conko Mukes said. "He he'ps me keep dis saloom. I pays him wages."

"Lon Wafer 'pears kinder homesick in his stomick," Bunk remarked, as he grinned at his new acquaintance.

"Lon's been squoze in de squeeze-wheel," Conko explained. "Dey squoze eve'ything outen him 'scusin' his perspiration, an' he's losin' dat now."

"I ain't got no money, no job, no nothin'," Lon declared.

Conko studied him a minute, then asked:

"Would you wish to git a job wuckin' aroun' here somewheres?"

"Shore would."

"Is you ever had expe'unce wuckin' in a saloom?" Conko asked.

"I ain't never wucked nothin' but my swaller in a barroom," Lon grinned feebly. "But I kin learn."

"I'll gib you a chance here wid two dollars per week pay ef you wants it," Conko replied.

"I takes it right now," Lon announced, as he stood up and took off his coat. "Whar is de wuck you wants did?"

"Don't soople up yo' muscle quite so peart, sonny. Dar ain't no use to pant," Conko Mukes grinned. "Booze-slingin' is a sociable job—set aroun' an' git acquainted wid yo'se'f a little while till I git back."

Conko walked out of the saloon and was gone about ten minutes. The two negroes, watching him, saw him cross the street and enter the gambling-house. When he returned he had a bundle under one arm.

"How is you gittin' along wid bein' sociable—so fur, Lon?" he asked cordially.

"I kinder likes it," Lon smiled. "I don't feel like a cucumberer on Gawd's green yearth no more."

"I jes' stopped by fer a minute to fotch you dis here package," Conko said, as he laid his bundle upon the table. "Dey tole me dat you left dis over in de gamblin'-room."

"Dat's so," Lon exclaimed. "I plum' fergot dat do-funny offen my mind."

"I's gwine agin," Conko announced, as Lon took the distress-rocket and placed it

upon a shelf behind the bar. "So long, niggers! Take a diamont hitch on yo' luck, Lon!"

"Huh!" Lon grunted. "I needs de kind of luck dat 'll stand 'thout no hitchin'."

CHAPTER IV.

BUNK BEARD HELPS.

WHEN Conko had gone, Lon turned to Bunk Beard, sighed several times, and began:

"Conko figgers dat I is in a hole because I loss my dollars, Bunk. But dat ain't it—I's in a deeper hole dan dat."

"Plenty folks is got some complaint to make 'bout de hole dey is in," Bunk smiled. "Whut ails youn?"

"I come to town on de boat to git married to-day, an' I ain't got married yit."

"You needn't hurry — dar's plenty time."

"But de time sot is done passed by."

Bunk emitted a sharp whistle of surprise, and looked at Lon with great amusement in his big eyes.

"Did you fergit dat little succumstance?" he asked.

"Naw, suh; but I didn't see no way to fix it. I loss my money, an' atter dat I wus jes' nachelly of de notion dat gittin' married wus onadvisable."

"Who wus you gwine hitch wid?"

"Nigger gal named Patter," Lon told him.

"Dat's a pretty little gum-drap name, but I ain't never heerd it befo'," Bunk commented.

"She ain't never lived in dis town. She come down yistiddy on a shawt visit to her paw till she stepped off," Lon explained.

"I reckon she's thinkin' 'bout organizin' yo' fun'ral instid of yo' weddin' 'bout now, ain't she?"

"I dunno," Lon sighed.

"Whut you aim to do about it?"

"Dat's whut I wants to ax you."

Bunk studied the situation for a few

minutes, tracing in the meantime with his finger the track of a long scar upon his brown face. The scar seemed to convey an idea to him.

"You mought fix yo'se'f up an' pretend dat you got hurted some way an' couldn't git to yo' weddin' on time."

"How you mean?"

"Wrop yo' head up in a bloody rag, an' git you a stick an' go cripplin' up to her house 'bout dark an' explain dat somebody bust yo' head an' you is jes' come to — got knocked in de head an' robbed."

"Bless Gawd!" Lon exclaimed. "Dat's de very properest thing to do. Whar'll I git de bloody rag?"

"I'll make one fer you," Bunk laughed.

He walked over to the bar and picked up a cloth which he used in polishing the top of the counter; then he poured half a glass of red wine upon the bar and mopped it up.

"Dar's yo' bloody rag!" he exclaimed, holding the cloth out for Lon's inspection.

"It shore has got de color!" Lon exclaimed admiringly. "Wrop it aroun' yo' head an' lemme see de good effects."

Bunk wrapped the cloth around his head like a bandage and Lon roared his approval.

"My Lawd!" he howled. "It looks like one of dese here fallin' stars is done fell on yo' top-knot."

"I think it will fool her all right," Bunk assured him. "Ef you want to trot over dar 'bout dark, I'll fix you up all right."

Their conversation was interrupted by the return of Conko Mukes.

"Is you had much high sawsiety in yo' life, Lon?" Conko asked.

"Naw. My sawsiety is de cotton-fiel' pets—mules, hosses, grubbin'-hoes."

"Would you wish to come to my house to a dance to-night?"

"Mebbe I ain't got good enough clothes. I lives in de country, an' my rags ain't town-broke yit."

"All you needs is de duds you is got on, a spote shirt, an' a pair of red socks."

"I's shawt on socks an' spote shirts."

"I kin loant you some," Bunk Beard proposed.

"Dat fixes you up!" Conko exclaimed.

"My house is 'bout a quarter mile up de river—sets back in de yard 'mongst de chinaberry-trees. Us begins to fiddle at nine o'clock."

"Yo' dance is gwine bust into de distracted meetin' at de Duty-done chu'ch, ain't it?" Bunk asked.

"Not no more'n usual," Conko grumbled. "Dem religium niggers has a distracted meetin' eve'y night in de year. But dey don't 'socheate wid me much—dey ain't got no invite to my dance."

"I'll come," Lon said gratefully. "Nine o'clock—dat'll gib me time to pay anodder little visit in between."

Bunk Beard conducted Lon to a room in the rear of the saloon and opened a large wooden box with a hinged top. He brought out a number of shirts and socks, ali with gaudy colors and loud stripes.

"Take yo' pick, Lonnie," he said. "Us is about of a sizeness an' any of 'em will fit you."

Lon selected a yellow sport shirt with large black stripes. He chose red socks with yellow stripes, and then laid eager hands upon a bright-green tie. "Lawd, dis fixes me up better'n ef I wus gwine be married!" he ejaculated.

Bunk placed the other garments back in the box and closed it. They brought the wearing apparel to Conko Mukes for approval, and then the three sat down and smoked their pipes, waiting for the trade that would come in after six o'clock, when a large number of levee hands would stop their work.

"Dis ain't much like a weddin' day to me, fellers," Lon Wafer remarked.

"Is you gwine be married?" Conko asked.

"I wus," Lon told him. "I had it fixed up wid de gal to step off at three o'clock."

"You wus settin' right here at three o'clock," Conko said in a surprised tone. "I rickoleck you axed me de time."

"Suttinly. I loss all my money, an' of

co'se no gal ain't gwine git married to a nigger so pore he couldn't buy her a weddin' sandsquich at a free-lunch counter."

"Dat's right," Conko agreed, in the tone of a man who had learned by bitter experience. "A married man is got to hab powerful stretchy legs so dey will gib a plenty when dey is pulled."

"I fotch dat fawty dollars to town to git hitched up wid," Lon said sadly.

"Ain't dat a shame!" Conko howled. "You know whut I would do to dem squeeze-wheelers? I'd bust 'em!"

"You think I oughter go tell de sheriff?" Lon asked.

"Naw!" Conko howled, and there was a wail of fright in his voice. "Fer de Lawd's sake, don't monkey wid no sheriff!"

"I b'lieve dat squeeze-wheel is agin de law," Lon protested.

"Shore it is!" Conko agreed. "All nigger gamblin' is agin de law—eve'y blame thing a nigger do is agin de law. Ef you go an' tell de sheriff, dat 'll be agin de law, an' you'll git yo'sef in trouble wid de cotehouse."

"Ef dat's de case, I ain't gwine," Lon declared.

They sat and smoked a while in silence, then Lon asked:

"Somewhar here in dis Rag-row a nigger gal named Patter Starr stays. Kin you-all tell me whar she is at?"

"Whut you wanter know fer?" Conko asked suspiciously.

"I's-got a invite to stay at her house while I is in town, an' I figger I muss git up dar an' let her know I'm come. Excusin' dat, I kinder hone fer a piece of Patter's pie."

"You cut out dat Patter-stuff," Conko growled. "Ef you wucks fer me I especks you to sleep in dis saloom nights an' gyard it from robbers."

Just as this was said a ragged negro with long, gray hair and long, kinky, cork-screw whiskers, entered the saloon. Lon Wafer turned his head, took one look at this new arrival, and shot out of his chair like a seed squeezed out of an

orange. He ran across the saloon and into the rear room.

"Hello, Kitt!" Conko Mukes greeted him. "Who you lookin' fer?"

"Is you-all saw anything of a country nigger named Lon Wafer?" Kitt inquired.

"Naw!" Conko and Bunk prevaricated in a duet.

Kitt turned and walked out.

Lon Wafer waited until he was sure that Kitt would not return, then he emerged from his hiding place and came back to the table, grinning at the two men in an embarrassed way.

"Does you know dat nigger man, Lon?" Conko inquired in an uneasy tone.

"Yep. His name is Kitt Starr."

"How come he is lookin' fer you so hard?"

"I reckon Patter Starr sot him at it."

"Does you know dat Patter-gal very good?" Conko asked in the same uneasy tone.

"I reckon so," Lon replied. "She is de gal I wus expeckin' to marry at three o'clock dis afternoon!"

"My good gosh!" Conko Mukes exclaimed. He sprang to his feet in his astonishment and broke the bowl of his pet corn-cob pipe by striking it against the top of the table. He spun around three times like a man who had been struck on the head and dazed; then he sank down in his chair, and his face revealed a strange mingling of fear and chagrin.

"O Lawdy!" he bellowed. "I done slopped de wrong pig!"

"Whut you mean by cuttin' up dat way?" Lon asked. "I ain't said nothin'."

"You done said a plum' plenty, Lonnie!" Conko wailed. "Why didn't you tell me you wus gwine marry at de fust off-startin' of dese arrangements?"

"You didn't ax me."

"Whoo-ee! I done sot down in a bowl of hot mush dis time!" Conko howled, fanning his sweating face with his hat. "Dis is awful!"

"I don't see no call fer you to onbosom no grievunce," Lon remarked. "Ef dat Kitt Starr is totin' a gun, he ain't huntin'

fer you—he's huntin' fer me because I didn't show up to marrify dat gal."

Conko Mukes gasped like a man who had just come out of the water after a long, deep dive. His face changed magically, breaking into a large, comprehensive smile.

"Dat's so!" he exclaimed. "Kitt won't love you no more, will he?"

"I figger he ain't huntin' me now to gib me no sugar-rag an' a string of shiny spoons," Lon declared.

"You niggers stay here till I git back!" Conko exclaimed. He hurried out of the saloon and trotted across the street like a big, fat bear.

Bunk Beard looked at Lon Wafer and winked. "You done busted a dynamite cap under dat nigger's shirt, Lonnie."

"Whut ails him?"

"I dunno," Bunk said. "Somepin' is gwine on dat I can't persackly git de hang of. It's powerful curious."

Bunk picked up the broken bowl of Conko's pipe which still lay upon the table, and began to finger it as he talked.

"Dat gamblin'-house acrost de street b'longs to Conko Mukes."

"Huh!" Lon grunted. "Dey's playin' me fer a sucker."

"Shore," Bunk replied. "Dat squeeze-wheel b'longs to Tax Sambola, an' Conko is married to Tax Sambola's sister. An' yit an' howsomever, Conko is sickin' you onto Tax Sambola an' is tryin' to git you to bust de squeeze-wheelers. Now, how come all dis mixation?"

"Gawd knows," Lon said in bewilderment.

"Tax Sambola, Slack Frame, Auger-hole, an' all dem niggers whut robbed you will be at dat dance to-night—an' yit an' howsomever, Conko is done invited you to come, too. Whut do dat signify?"

"Mebbe he expects me to git my nigger up an' rush-house 'em," Lon suggested. "I ain't gwine do it. I'll rozum up my hands an' hold on to my niggerhood by de tail!"

They thought over the mystery for a long time. Finally Lon asked:

"Whut made Conko git so oneasy when I tole him I wus gwine marry Patter Starr?"

"Kitt Starr is de head-boss leader of de law-an'-awder niggers in dis town," Bunk grinned. "He's a deakin in de Duty-done chu'ch, he argufies fer prohibition, an' he fights Conko an' de squeeze-wheelers all de time."

When Lon heard this he broke out into the first loud laugh he had uttered since hc came to Rag-row.

"He's skeart I'll blow off de game to Kitt," Lon said. "I kin see dat plain—ef dar ain't nothin' ails my eyes."

CHAPTER V.

EXPLANATIONS TO PATTER.

FOR several hours Patter Starr had been entertaining her father.

When Lon Wafer failed to appear for his wedding at three o'clock, the Reverend Shed Cosset, a man named Thumb-off, and Kitt Starr had encouraged Patter to hope that something had delayed Lon's arrival for a little while.

As the time passed, she began to get nervous; two hours later she was hysterical; an hour after that she was maniacal.

Then Shed Cosset and Thumb-off excused themselves under pretense of going to hunt Lon Wafer. When outside of the house, they agreed among themselves that Lon had given Patter the slip; that such a worthless negro was not worth hunting for anyhow; that it was Kitt's business to search for Lon, and that they thought it would be best to go home and take a little nap and get ready for the church service at the Duty-done meeting-house that night.

Kitt Starr endured Patter's company as long as he could, and then he left under a promise to find Lon Wafer right away and bring him to the house.

Kitt had not found Lon, but he had heard much of him, and had gone to Thumb-off and asked that negro to ac-

company him back to his home while he broke the news to Patter.

In the meantime, Bunk Beard was preparing Lon Wafer for his visit to Patter Starr. He stepped back and surveyed his workmanship with the appraising eye of an artist. He broke out into a loud laugh.

"How does I look?" Lon inquired.

"You look as messy as a b'iler explosion," Bunk guffawed.

Lon's head was expertly bandaged with a large, white cloth, which looked bloody from the stains of red wine which had been poured upon it after the bandage was adjusted. In the place of his collar he had another bloody-looking cloth bound around his neck. He distorted his face into a puckered protest against his many misfortunes, and Bunk nodded in approbation.

"You look powerful onfit to be de party of de secont part at a weddin', Lonnie," Bunk snickered. "I think Patter will fergib you real prompt fer not showin' up at de app'inted time."

"I guess I better make de rifle an' go trackin' up to her house," Lon said miserably. "I bet she vitooperates me a whole lot."

"Not ef she's got a kind heart like you says she has," Bunk said.

"I ain't so shore 'bout her kind heart now dat I've come down to it," Lon sighed.

"Aw, slop a couple drinks into yo'se'f an' go on!" Bunk urged. "I'm shore Patter will be glad to see her spangle-headed beau."

"Gimme my sky-rocket," Lon said mournfully, after he had consumed some liquor. "It's de onliest peace-offerin' I kin affode."

It was nearly nine o'clock when Lon Wafer stepped upon the porch of the little house where Patter lived, and knocked timidly upon the door. For half a mile he had been practising a limp and rehearsing certain facial expressions which would have been the envy of the motion-picture star.

Patter opened the door. She was a tall, slender thing, who would cause a stir in any negro's heart by her good looks; but now her beauty was tear-drenched.

"Howdy, Patter!" Lon greeted her in a pain-choked voice, as he limped feebly into the room. "I'm kinder late, but I got here at las'."

Patter gazed at him a moment through her teary eyes, then uttered a little shriek and reeled back against the wall of the room.

"Whut ails you, Lonnie?" she wailed. "Whut busted you up so?"

"I fell in wid a passel of butchers," Lon groaned. "Dey kilt me an' scalded me an' scraped me an' hung me up on a hook like a pig!"

"O Lawdy! Is you gwine die?"

"No'm. De dorctor say dat I mought recover ef I takes good keer an' nobody don't excite me too much. He say dat I ain't hurted so awful bad excusin' dat my chin is pushed back too fur under my face."

The girl sank down in a chair with her soul in her eyes as she gazed at the bandaged liar.

"You muss be ailin' consid'able, Lonnie," she said in a teary voice. "Yo' face is all wrinkled up like a burnt boot."

"I feels like a burnt boot," Lon told her.

"Whar you been at all day?" Patter asked.

Lon suddenly realized that he had not fixed up a story to tell Patter, he had merely fixed up himself to show her. He took a little time for reflection before he answered her question.

His eyes wandered around the room. It was the first time he had been in this house, as he had met and courted Patter on a plantation up the river. On the mantel-shelf, over the big open fireplace, were two little china dogs, one was headless and the other had no tail. Against the wall was an antiquated settee with the seat caved in and the springs projecting underneath until they touched the floor.

There was a rocking-chair with one handle gone, and one rocker missing; and another rocking-chair with the rockers sawed off short so that a man sitting in it who was careless about how far back he leaned might find himself upset and standing on his ear in a minute. A scrap of ragged carpet was under Lon's feet, and this, with the chairs he and Patter occupied, completed the furniture of the room.

All of this he noticed while he was trying to think where he had been all day. At length he answered:

"I been knockin' aroun' a little, an' I been knocked on a plenty."

"Did you meet anybody in town dat you knowed?"

"I met de 'quaintance of a band of hearty hand-shakers, an' dey shook me good."

"I knows all 'bout dat, Lonnie," Patter said. "You got off de boat dis mawnin' wid fawty dollars, an' you drapped all dat fawty bettin' on de squeeze-wheel, an' you wus skeart to come to yo' own weddin'."

If the house had suddenly collapsed and had fallen on Lon, he could not have been more completely crushed by this astounding statement.

He had risked everything upon the chance that Patter, being a stranger in town, would not hear of his adventure with the squeeze-wheel. He saw difficulties in the way of deceiving Patter if she possessed this information. She was evidently waiting for him to say something, so he spoke.

"I warn't really skeart, Patter. I wus hurted too bad to come."

"Who hurted you?"

Lon decided now that if he had spent as much time in fixing up his tale of woe as he had in adjusting his blood-stained bandages, he would be getting along better. As it was, he had to make up his narrative as he went along, and he found it extremely difficult to play the double rôle of a greatly injured man and an expert prevaricator.

"I don't know who done it," he said.

"Ef I knowed, I hand him out a racket dat'd make him take to water like a muskrat."

"Who you think done it?" Patter persisted.

"I cain't say fer certain," Lon replied, with increasing difficulty. "I ain't nachelly got more dan a thimble-full of dog's brains, an' my remembrunce ain't real good. Excusin' dat, atter I loss my dollars I teetered into de Stingaree saloom an' tuck a couple of striped drinks. Dar wus a raw ole cullud pusson in dar an' I think it wus him done it."

"Whut did he do it fer?" Patter wanted to know.

"You'll hab to ax him, Patter," Lon said impatiently. "Jes' go to his cabin an' wake him up in de night an' ax him."

At this moment there was a diversion, and Lon welcomed it in his secret heart with cheers and loud applause. There was heard the rattle of a small chain dragged across the floor, and a little pet fox came frisking into the room.

"Dar now!" Lon exclaimed. "Dat's my little pet fox whut I gib you because I loved you so much."

The fox leaped up into his arms like a kitten, and Lon laid the bundle he carried upon the floor and began to caress the animal. Patter watched him with eyes which narrowed shrewdly, but she said nothing.

"Dis little fox reminds my mind, Patter," Lon said. "When I wus gittin' off de boat dis mawnin' a white man gib me a weddin' present."

He lifted the fox to his shoulder while he stooped over to get the bundle which contained the ship distress rocket. Patter watched closely and uttered a sharp exclamation.

When Lon rose stiffly and handed her the rocket, she kept her eyes upon the fox, without even a glance at the bundle he laid in her lap.

Up to that moment, Lon had noticed a slight sympathy in her manner toward him. She was suspicious, but he felt that his presence would go far toward making

her forget how he had treated her, and fix another time for the wedding. But from the moment he handed her the rocket, Lon noted a change in her voice and manner. She was angry, and showed it. Lon wondered what had caused this sudden change.

"Whut you gwine do now, Lonnie?"

The hardness in Patter's voice frightened him. "I—er—I jes' come to tell you dat I's arrived down—dat I's here— an' dat I ain't gwine be able to accept yo' invite to stay at yo' home while I is in town."

The look on Patter's face when he finished this bright remark made the flesh crinkle on the back of Lon's neck, and his breathing felt catchy, as if something were cutting his breath in two and he was getting only the short half.

"I reckon not!" Patter responded in a tone so full of fury that Lon was immediately sorry that he had shut the door behind him when he came in. "Whar you gwine to stay at?"

"I's gwine bunk down in de Stingaree saloom to-night," Lon said, hardly realizing what he was answering in his confusion. "But fust I's gwine to Conko Mukes's house to a dance—see my new spotte shirt an' my red socks? I's gittin' plum' stoop-shouldered lookin' down at dem socks—"

Lon broke off and a look of terror came into his face. He knew that he had told entirely too much. His breathing became as noisy as the exhaust of a heavy freight locomotive.

"I—er—I's jes' gwine set up ag'in' de wall an' look!"

Patter sniffed, then turned and uttered a call.

"O pap! Come in here a minute an' see dis yellor-striped fool. He looks like a scrambled egg!"

"It's kinder hot in here!" Lon remarked uneasily, as he put the pet fox upon the floor and limped across the room and opened the door. "Us needs some fresh air."

"You needn't open dat door to git

ready to run," Patter said easily. "We ain't fixin' to do you nothin'. Yo' Rag-row c'reer ain't over yit, an' we kin wait."

Kitt Starr came in. His cork-screw whiskers and his long hair were disheveled, and he squinted at Lon Wafer as the light stung his eyes.

"Well, Lonnie, I hear tell dat you wus well skinnt wid de gamblers dis mawn-in'."

"Yes, suh. An' I happened wid a accidint an' got my head skinnt, too."

"He's powerful hurted, daddy," Patter said, as she walked over and laid her hand softly upon the bandage.

Lon felt that this was not a kindly action, and his hair stood up on end beneath his bandage.

"Dem gamblers tuck eve'ything but my hide an' hair an' taller," Lon muttered, trying desperately to keep the conversation upon something else than his pretended injury.

"But dey left de hide an' hair all right, pap," Patter said with a contemptuous laugh. Then she closed the hand which rested softly upon the bandaged head of Lon Wafer and lifted the bandage off.

Lon did not move, did not utter a word.

She snatched at the rag tied around his neck and tore it away.

Still Lon was silent.

Patter dropped the red-stained bandage on the floor at Lon's feet, and rubbed an exploring hand over his scalp.

"He ain't got a single bump excusin' some whut ind'cates dat he is a nachel-bawn lun'tic an' oughter be tuck to a foolish-house in a shiny-black pest-wagon," she announced.

Lon was still speechless. Kitt Starr crossed the room and stood in the doorway which was Lon's means of exit to the open air.

"I knowed he didn't hab no blood on dat rag bandage as soon as he picked up dat little fox," Patter declared. "He sot dat fox up on his shoulder an' dat fox never smelt dat bandage one single time!"

"My Gawd!" Lon found his voice to exclaim.

Patter laid her hand on Lon's shoulder, and Lon winced. She looked down into Lon's eyes, and Lon was ever after able to locate his backbone because cold snakes chased up and down it from the chair he sat on to the hair on the back of his neck.

"Daddy Kitt," Patter said in a terrible voice, still holding Lon's eyes with her hypnotic stare. "Dis here Lon Wafer is de misablest nigger in dis town."

"I reckon he feels dat way now," Kitt agreed, grinning at Patter.

"Jes' wait till I git done with him, pap," Patter continued. "Lon will look as foolish as one of dese here town hosses wid a straw bonnet straddle of his y-ears."

"Dat's right!" Kitt snickered.

Lon turned desperate eyes toward the door against which Kitt was leaning.

Patter caught him by the point of his chin and wrenched his head around so that he had to face her again.

"I'll sot de time fer you to do de nuptial in dis fambly, Lonnie," Patter declared in that same terrible voice. "Now git up an' git!"

Lon Wafer was glad of the chance to go.

Kitt Starr took a step backward so that Lon could pass through the door. Then Kitt took a step forward and implanted a most lusty and satisfying kick in the place where it would do the most good. Lon shot across the porch and fell in a heap in the yard. When he picked himself up the door was shut.

"Dat gal talked like she wus manoeverin' vowlence agin me," he sighed as he hurried away. "I figger I didn't do myself a bit of good by gwine to see her—I oughter stayed away!"

CHAPTER VI.

TULSA MUKES.

IT was a long walk to the home of Conko Mukes, but Lon had no trouble in finding the house because of the glare of light from the uncurtained windows both up-stairs and down.

"Dey muss expect plenty folks," Lon reasoned, as he looked up from the shadow of the chinaberry-trees which lined the walk. "Dey's lit up like a circus."

As he stepped upon the porch, walking upon a piece of ragged carpet which made his footsteps noiseless, he heard a woman's irascible voice:

"I don't want no howlin', idjut, burr-head country nigger at my dance. Jes' because Tax robbed dat coon of all his money an' you tuck pity on him ain't no good reason why I needs him in dis house. When he comes, you kin tote him back to de saloom."

"I ain't gwine do it, Tulsa!" the rumbling voice of Conko Mukes protested. "I needs dat country nigger in my bizzness, an' I kin onvite him to dis house ef I wants to—dis house b'longs to you an' me bofe."

"Ef he comes to dis house, I'll git some town nigger to ease him out into de back yard an' onhinge his mind wid a fence-picket!" Tulsa made reply.

After overhearing this conversation Lon decided not to announce his arrival by knocking upon the door. He had been kicked out of one house that night, and he did not care to repeat the experience.

"I figger it's onwise to go to dat dance," he muttered to himself. "I's skeart de seat of my britches won't hold out. I'll fetch loose from dis porch an' pike fer home."

He turned to retreat, but missed his footing at the step and clattered down to the walk, making as much noise as a horse walking the gangplank of a steamboat.

"Dat's him now!" Conko Mukes chuckled. "Cain't you hear his light footsteps on de porch?" He went into the hall, threw open the front door, and gazed out into the dark where the shadow of the trees rested heaviest. He could not see anything, but he took a chance on Lon's answering.

"Howdy, Lon!" he exclaimed cordially. "Come right on in—me an' Tulsa is jes' been talkin' 'bout you!"

"Yes, suh," Lon said, as he came up

on the porch with reluctant feet. "I heered whut dat woman said, an' I wus gittin' ready to skallyhoot away."

"Whut did she say?" Conko asked.

"She specify dat she wus gwine git a nigger to lead me out in de back yard an' pay special heed to my head!"

"You got her right!" Conko howled.

"But I axes you dis; whut would you be doin' 'bout dat time?"

"I ain't sayin' whut I'd do," Lon responded with a courage he did not feel. "But I ain't willin' to hab no nigger step on my tail an' stan' dar as ef my feelin's didn't count fer nothin'."

"I bet you'd bite all right!" Conko boomed admiringly. "Either bite or howl!"

Having revived his courage by brave words, Lon stepped into the room behind Conko Mukes and looked into the face of the handsomest negro woman he had ever seen.

Tulsa Mukes was a golden-brown woman with Spanish features, and was dressed like the queen of the circus. Lon had never seen such an aggregation of gaudy, flashy jewelry, and spangles upon the human form. He bowed before her with the same sort of deferential bow that he rendered to the white folks upon the big plantations.

As for Tulsa Mukes, she looked at Lon in surprise. Lon was not dressed according to her idea of a country negro—no brogan shoes, no mud on his overalls, no overalls, no hickory shirt with the sleeves torn off at the elbows.

"Dis here is Lon Wafer, Tulsa," Conko Mukes announced. "He ain't no gaudy object, but he's got kinder friendly feelin's ef he ain't riled up!"

"Whut you lie to me fer, Conko?" Tulsa snapped. "Dis ain't no country nigger!"

"He tole me he owned a plantation up de ribber," Conko chuckled. "He say he lived on dat land an' wucked fer a livin'. So I bumped it off dat he wus a country nigger."

Tulsa Mukes rose from her chair,

walked to where Lon was standing, patted his shoulder familiarly, and said in an admiring tone:

"You'll pass, Lonnie. I'll take back all dem onkind words. Dar ain't no nigger whut is easier on de eye dan you is, an' I bet you'll be a pop'lar figger in Rag-row!"

"I says de same back at you, sister," Lon laughed. "You shore is one smooth little piece of works like a stem-winder."

"I tole you he wus better dan he looked!" Conko protested. "I said he wus a scalded-cat kind of nigger."

"I done found it onadvisable to b'lieve anything you say," Tulsa retorted, reseating herself and looking with admiration at Lon Wafer.

"It's a good thing fer me you come in when you did, Lonnie," Conko remarked. "Tulsa wus prancin' aroun' tryin' to step a hole in de floor, she wus so mad."

There was a sound of music floating in through the windows.

"Dar comes de band an' all de nigger dancers trailin' along behime," Tulsa announced. "Dat shows you is country, Lonnie. You oughter waited down de street fer de music an' follered it to de house."

In a few minutes all the musicians and all the people invited to the dance came trooping in, and Lon stood against the wall and looked at the crowd.

There was a deafening clatter of voices, and the noise was augmented by the stamping of many feet upon the uncarpeted floor, the scraping of chairs in the hallway, and out upon the porches. People were laughing, yelling, slapping each other on the back, and some were "warming up" by practising certain intricate dance-steps without the music.

In a few minutes Tulsa came to Lon and entertained him by telling the names of some of her guests and commenting upon them.

"Dar's my brudder, Tax Sambola, an' dar is Augerhole—I heerd tell dat you is done made deir 'quaintance at de squeeze-wheel. Did you lose many money?"

"Fawty dollars," Lon said easily. His loss did not appear so great and so tragic while he was looking at Tulsa Mukes and remembering the kick he had received from Patter Starr's father.

"Dat's too bad," Tulsa laughed. "Ef you wants it back I kin tell you whar to find it."

"Whar?"

"In Tax Sambola's pants," Tulsa laughed. "He's got it in his pocket now."

"Dat don't he'p me none. I'll starve to death an' die of stomick trouble befo' I'll try to take it away from him."

"I bet Tax would ride yo' collar ef you tried it," Tulsa told him.

"De way I feels right now, I think dat fawty dollars wus a good invest—it got me a invite to yo' party."

Tax Sambola and Augerhole came over to where they were standing and brought another negro whom Lon had seen in the gambling-house, called Slack Frame.

Slack had the appearance of a man who was habitually afraid. He winced at every unusual sound, glanced nervously around him at every movement, and his weak chin twitched like a rabbit's nose.

"How come you didn't tell me you had all dem fine clothes, Lon?" Tax Sambola laughed. "I'd a loant you some money on yo' duds an' played you on de squeeze-wheel till I robbed you of yo' pants!"

"You shore wus a splunger on dat squeeze-wheel," Augerhole laughed. "Most niggers don't lose more dan one dollar an' atter dat you kin hear 'em beef-in' fer a mile. You shore wonned our regyards ef you didn't win no money."

"It 'pears to me I mought hab wonned yo' good opinion wid a durn sight less dollars," Lon retorted. Then he asked: "Don't all de niggers know dat is a tricky wheel—dat it ain't worked honest?"

"Some of 'em does," Tax Sambola answered. "Dey finds it out like you done. But dat don't pester a nigger—ef he kin win a dollar offen a tricky wheel, he feels like de good Lawd made a miscue when He made him black."

"Conko tole me dat we busted into yo'

weddin'," Augerhole laughed. "Whut did Patter Starr say when you went dar?"

"She acted plenty petulant, an' said she wus gwine make me look like a sun-bonnet atter while," Lon grinned.

"Whut did Kitt say?" Augerhole asked.

"He put up a roar an' scrambled up his whiskers some more by pawin' 'em wid his hands."

"Whut did *you* say?" Augerhole persisted laughingly.

"Nothin'. I couldn't think of no follow-up to speak back."

A man came and whispered a few words to Tax Sambola. Tax dropped his laughing manner, and his face became serious, his eyes grew cunning and sharp. He studied a moment, then asked:

"I guess dem folks ain't very fond of you now, is dey?"

"Dey thinks I'm puffedekly no good."

This reply seemed to relieve Tax Sambola's mind. His face cleared, he took out his cigarette-case and offered it to Lon Wafer, and walked to where he could stand by his side. Later he held a whispered conversation with Tulsa Mukes, and then walked away. Tulsa caught Lon by the arm and said:

"Lonnie, you is a stranger, an' you ain't never seed whut a nice house I'm got. Come an' I'll show you de place."

Lon obediently followed her around, seeing nothing that was worth the trouble the woman took to show it.

It was merely a big plantation house built by a white planter for his home. It was frescoed by water-marks which showed the stage of the water during several disastrous years.

A wide hallway with broad steps leading to the portion of the house above; immense rooms on each side of the hall, and behind these a very large dining-room and kitchen; porticoes all around the lower part of the house—all of this was familiar to Lon. Every plantation house was built the same way.

As for the furnishing of the home, there was none. Bare floors, a few calendar prints, a number of chairs and beds, and rooms large and bare.

Lon did not understand her purpose in thus leading him around until she conducted him up the steps and into a certain room. This room was unlighted except for the faint rays of the moon shining through the open window. As they entered in the darkness, Tulsa laid her hand upon Lon's arm, and he could feel her fingers trembling. She led him over to the open window.

"Look down in de side yard, Lonnie," she whispered. "Kin you see anybody?"

"Suttinly," Lon answered, peering through the darkness. "Two mens is down dar 'longside dat fig-tree."

"Whut do dey look like?" Tulsa panted.

"Dey look like nigger mens."

"Lawdymussy!" the woman exclaimed. "Dis am terrible!"

"Whut ails dem mens?" Lon asked. "Ain't dey git no invite to dis dance?"

"Naw. I didn't want 'em—"

The door of the room opened almost noiselessly, and Conko Mukes entered, panting from his climb up the steps.

Tulsa uttered a smothered exclamation of fright.

"Come on down to de dancers, Tulsa," Conko wheezed. "De fiddles is gittin' ready to scrape, an' dey 'll think somepin' is done happened ef you ain't wid 'em."

"I needs to find out whut dem niggers wants," Tulsa protested, her lips trembling, making her words chatter.

"Tain't no way to do, honey," Conko replied, as he took her by the hand and led her toward the door. "Let Lon Wafer stay here an' watch 'em an' you kin come back atter de fust dance."

"Hurry back, Tulsa!" Lon urged. "I done seed mo' strange things to-day 'thout no lickin' in me dan I ever seed in my life befo'. Ef you don't come back soon, I'll quit dis watchin' job."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

Somewhere in the Pacific

by H. A. Lamb

IN our March 10 number we published a letter from an enthusiast in the navy who demanded a story with the navy and things naval furnishing the background; and we explained at the time that such stories are few and very far between, because no one seems to want to write 'em. But—well, did we ever disappoint anybody?—THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

WHITHER BOUND?

IT all began when we first sighted the Dunstan.

She was a big passenger ship of the Blue Belt line, and the first ship of the kind we had seen at the jumping-off place. All hands lined the rail of the gunboat and watched the Dunstan until she faded to a trail of smoke on the horizon. We thought it was curious that we didn't see any passengers on her decks, but it was none of our business. Later, we found out why it was.

Now about what happened there in the jumping-off place—

You can't find an account of it in the reports of three navies, and the Blue Belt line skippers aren't volunteering information. The papers never printed a line about it. So I guess if anybody's going to get busy and tell what really happened, it might as well be me.

Anyway, I want to see Kempton, who

is just out of Annapolis, get the credit that's coming to him. Kempton is one of those stiff, uniformed ducks with a mind as exact as the crease in his pants; but he stuck by me in a tight place, and I'm grateful.

It was patriotism that first got me going. Yes, I had a bad case of the "boys-in-khaki" feeling when General Pershing started on a hike over the border. Things were stirring around pretty lively then, and I wanted to be in the show and sing "Good by girls, we're going to Mexico," too.

I enlisted in the navy and admitted that I knew a few things about a wireless. I had visions of being the trusted wireless operator on the flagship of the battle fleet and chumming up with the admiral himself; but they don't do things that way in the navy—only in the movies.

At the Charleston Navy Yard they assigned me to a ship which proved to be a gunboat, rather old, and named the Badger. At that, the Badger was a left-

over from Spain at the end of the Spanish-American war, and in the derelict destroying service.

When we left Charleston, President Wilson had just called out the militia, and things looked promising for the big scrap. I polished up the wireless apparatus and experimented with the spark, trying to get more kick out of it.

My job was pretty soft, because we never picked up anything in the way of a message for the Badger and my range was too limited to do much listening in. The apparatus was in my cabin, and I had a bed shoved in a box which they called a bunk. I thought it was a pretty good bed—no bunk about it at all. The other fellows slept in the cellar in hammocks.

It was a couple of days later that they broke the news to me. I was on deck, chinning with a gunner's mate, Terence Borden, who used to come to my cabin and kid me along—me being a landlubber.

"Terry," said I, "do you think we'll bombard Vera Cruz or just blockade it?"

Terence stopped chewing his plug-cut long enough to look at me out of the corners of his blue eyes.

"Nayther," he said, "it's a long ways from Very Cruz we're going. Phwat put th' idee av fightin' into yer head?"

"That's the idea that made me enlist," I said. "There's a war, isn't there?"

"Sure," Terry smiled on me widely, "there ain't any war, lad. There's complications, but no fightin' for th' likes av us. It's through th' canal we be goin'."

No war! It took me a minute to realize that he meant it. But Borden always had good dope as to what our orders were. I asked him where we were going after we got through the canal.

"We're bound," he informed me, "four thousand miles from here, an' a thousand from annywhere else. 'Tis the ind av th' world, an' no mistake. A spot it is that God loves less than anny av th' sivin seas, to my mind. You'll hear it called th' jumpin'-off place by the men that's been there, and whin they have they turn their backs on it with thanksgivin's and praise.

"There's the island inhabited wance by Mr. Robinson Crusoe in th' midst av it, an' stiddy winds from th' nor'west day in an' day out. Th' coast is mostly rocks, with grand mountains for scenery, an' nothin' much else. There's wan town in th' strait, Puntas Arenas."

Puntas Arenas! That was in Magellan Strait, at the southern tip of South America. I felt pretty sad as I understood this, when I had enlisted to fight Mexicans.

"What are they sending us to a place like that for?"

"'Tis along av th' merchant skippers," explained Terence, "who, Lord help thim, ought to go to sea with a nursin' bottle. Two av thim have sighted derelicts off th' Evangelistas, an' asked a warship to rid th' sea av th' scourge. We are th' warship."

"How long do you figure we'll be there?"

"There's no tellin', Dick. Maybe a week, maybe a year. We must search th' waters with th' care av a jutiful patrol ship like we are. Th' currents drift derelicts about till it's harrd to find thim. Wance before I was there for six months, an' there's a matter av a difference av opinion I left unsettled in Puntas."

At the time this last bit of information didn't interest me. Later I had cause to remember it. All in all, Borden's size-up of the situation agreed with that of the other men I interviewed. They were not eager to visit that part of the Pacific for some reason—those who had been there. They didn't explain it, just swore a bit and shrugged their shoulders.

"I get you," I told Terence, "we're bound for 'somewhere in the Pacific.'"

CHAPTER II.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DUNSTAN?

TWO days after we passed the Dunstan we arrived at Puntas Arenas. The Badger needed coal, and Captain Godfrey wanted to pick up informa-

tion that might be circulating in that port concerning derelicts. We had not been able to sight any up to now.

You know Puntas Arenas, don't you? A little, corrugated iron town snuggled in the foot of the usual mountains, half-way through the strait. There are no customs dues, and this makes it a clearing house for smuggling on a large scale. The town itself is a sort of hang-out for the political driftwood of South America. I saw a specimen of the smugglers when we went to shore.

Our stay in the place was to be brief, and only a boatload of the first-class men were allowed ashore. Borden was in the cutter, and when we cleared the gunboat he pointed out a sloppy-looking schooner that was coming lazily up the bay. A broad, squat man of powerful build was at the wheel. On the stern of the craft the name *Bella Clara* was painted.

"D'ye see that fellow," whispered Terry, "at th' wheel? Well, that's Tom Roth—a good man to steer clear av. He bears a bad name along th' coast here, an' not without cause. There's many a wreck near here that Tom Roth's seen th' inside av, an' taken away more than he took in. Bechune you an' me, it's well to keep your mouth shut in Puntas an' your eyes open. Along th' water front you'll find deserters from most av th' navies av South America—some av thim are on th' *Belly Clary*."

When we reached a wharf Borden steered me toward one of the saloons, a one-story, sheet-iron joint with a bar of pine boards. We hoisted aboard our first drink in a month and sat down at one of the tables with our next. There were half a dozen other men in the place, of all nationalities. Terry cast his eye over them curiously.

"Have anny av you men sighted a derelict on th' west coast? It's thim that we're after in these waters, though the job is little to our linkin'."

"There was one of the hulks reported off the *Evangelistas* about a week ago," answered the bar-keep, an Englishman.

"Was it schooner or shteamer?" asked Terry.

"No telling," the Englishman answered shortly. "You ought to run athwart it without any trouble, if you keep your eye peeled."

"Thanks," returned Terry, finishing off his glass, "that's good news. It wad be a pity, now, if th' fine shteamer we sighted awhile ago should pile up on a hulk like that."

"What ship was that?"

"The *Dunstan*, av th' Blue Belt line—though it's th' first av th' like we've iver sighted in these waters."

Several of the men in the place looked up at this, and one of them addressed Terry gruffly.

"The Blue Belt line runs west from Australia—not east. There ain't never been one of them ships around here—not within a few thousand miles. You can't tell me you saw the *Dunstan* near here."

"Sure, the *Dunstan* it wuz, fifty miles out from th' strait, shteamin' along swately, about fifteen knots. I made out th' name av th' ship, plain as I see you now. It's yourself that's blind, considerin' that th' ship has touched at Puntas two days ago."

"It 'asn't been 'ere," broke in the Englishman, from the bar.

Several others spoke up in agreement, and Terry was puzzled. We couldn't figure out how the ship could have missed the port coming through the strait. You see they don't navigate at night in Magellan Strait, on account of the tide rips and williwaws, especially craft that don't know the passage well. It wasn't possible that the *Dunstan* had gone by in the night. It was plain that our news stirred up quite a little interest among the men at the bar. They got to talking among themselves pretty earnest.

By and by Borden said he'd take a turn through the town and look it over, and come back for me when he was through. He went out, but he hadn't been gone ten minutes when a big chap in a linen suit and Panama hat breezed in. Some

of the other men in the place greeted him politely but he didn't pay much attention to them. After glancing about the tables he sat down opposite me, although there were two or three tables vacant.

He had good manners all right—asked me what I'd have, and said the town was happy to have American visitors again. He said it was months since an American warship had touched there, and there wasn't much for our consular agent, Mr. Braun, to do, so he had gone on a visit to Buenos Aires.

My companion introduced himself as Joseph Moritz, and from his manner I guessed that he was quite a somebody in the place. He finally got around to quizzing me about the Dunstan. I told him all I knew, and asked if it was straight that the ship never reached Puntas. He said it was.

Moritz and I were on good terms by the time our second drink was gone and I asked him if he knew of any derelicts along the west coast. He seemed kind of surprised and said he hadn't heard of any. I explained that the Badger was sent here to sink a derelict, and that one had been reported as being off the Evangelistas.

"I don't think there's any truth in that report, Mr. Henderson," said Moritz—he was Spanish or Portuguese, but spoke excellent English—"because I own several schooners around here and no derelict has been reported for the last year. If there was one where you say I would be certain to know it. My schooners pass the Evangelistas two or three times a week."

The Evangelistas? They are three big rocks with some smaller ones, lying just out of the entrance to the strait, a little north, and with a light on one. You have to watch out for them when you are making the entrance in a fog.

"What kind of a ship is this derelict?" went on Moritz. "Do you know if it's a dismasted schooner, or a bark?"

"You've got me there," I admitted. "Our information doesn't go as far as that; but we'll find out for ourselves within two or three days."

"Then you are going to leave Puntas to-morrow?"

I told him we were, as soon as we had coaled, and we dropped the subject. Then he gave me a bit of news. An English cruiser had come into the bay, and was anchored near us. Moritz looked at me pretty keenly when he said it, as if he expected the news would stir me up some. It didn't though, and after a few more pleasantries he got up and left. He was as polite as they make 'em, but he acted as if he was cross examining me to find out what I was and what I wanted in the town.

When Borden didn't show up at the time he said he would, I hiked out and wandered around looking for him. It was growing dark then, and I expected to hear our bosun's whistle any minute. So I worked along the streets by the wharves, to where our boats were waiting.

I didn't see Terry, but I did see Señor Moritz again. He was standing with his back to me in front of one of the harbor saloons. With him was a young looking officer from the English cruiser. I could just make out his cap and blue coat in the gloom.

I hung back, not wishing to be lugged into any more conversation by Moritz in front of the officer, where I might have to stay at attention and miss the boat. While I was looking around for a way to get by them without being spotted I heard what Moritz was saying. As soon as I caught the drift of it, I hung back and listened.

"The man I saw," the Portuguese was saying, "was not a seaman. He was in uniform, and claimed to be from the gunboat. But he talked like a landsman. He said the gunboat was searching for a derelict at the west entrance. What do you make of it?"

"There's something queer about it all, Moritz," replied the officer. "I never saw a United States gunboat with a build like that. Look at that sloping funnel and curved bow. The deck is flush. Another thing, the beggars have finished coaling, and the dock hands say they are going to

take up anchor early in the morning. Does Braun know them?"

"Braun is away at Buenos," returned Moritz, "he can tell us nothing. It looks suspicious, their clearing out as soon as you come in. What are you going to do about it?"

"Watch the gunboat as closely as we can. We have been calling the Dunstan by wireless for two days, without an answer. Captain Pemberton is awfully cut up over it. You know the liner was to meet us at Puntas. We received a wireless from her when she was about a hundred miles out of the strait. After that the Dunstan seems to have been wiped out, wireless and all. Even if there had been a fire in the hold she could have let us know. The thing seems incredible."

There was a pause while they seemed to be turning it over in their minds. The news hit me all of a sudden. The liner's non-appearance at Puntas was strange, but now the officer from the cruiser declared that she had dropped out of sight, as it were, in the middle of the strait. No wonder they were curious about us, because the gunboat had been near the spot where the liner was last heard from.

They were talking in lower voices now, and I thought I caught the word Tasmania once or twice. Then Moritz raised his voice until I could hear what he said.

"We can get that johnnie in the saloon doped. I'll take him on one of my schooners and find out what he knows."

The officer said something about the American uniform. Moritz laughed.

"What can he prove?" he said. "He sits in there swilling booze and finds himself stowed away in a nice quiet place. Do you think he's going to ask an investigation? Well, he won't."

It was about time for me to be leaving. I was looking around for a way to the docks when, sure enough, our bosun's whistle cut through the dark. That settled it. I wasn't going to run the chance of being left on shore all night. It was pretty dark by then, and I stepped around the corner, past them, at a lively gait.

Moritz peered at me as I went by.

"Here you," he called, "wait a minute."

Instead of waiting, I slipped to one side in the shadows of an alley, dodged around a couple of corners and came out on the street leading to the wharf where our cutter was waiting. If the Portuguese chap followed me he lost his way. Anyway, I got clear of him. And I met up with Borden, who was trotting along double time, headed for the cutter.

"Why the hell didn't you come back?" I asked him, remembering how he'd quit me.

"Dick, do not be harrd on me," he panted—we were both running. "'Tis innocent I am av such an act. Maybe 'tis th' drink in me, but I've seen an' heard quare things th' night. They do be sayin' th' Dunstan was lost at sea."

"It's true," I told him. "I heard an English officer say it."

"Well then, Dick, it's sure as I'm Terence Borden that th' Belly Clary had a hand in it. Th' schooner was lyin' off th' Evangelistas whin th' liner come by."

On our return trip to the gunboat Terry relapsed into slumber, his head on my shoulder, but my own head was occupied with what I had learned in town that night.

Green as I was to the sea, the fact that a liner had disappeared in broad daylight struck me as incredible. That the Badger should come under suspicion was natural enough, considering the circumstances. I wondered if I ought to report what I had heard to Captain Godfrey or Lieutenant Kempton. I decided not to do so. It was none of my business.

CHAPTER III.

SHOWING HAND—AND HEELS.

IT was two days after that, if I remember right, that we sighted the derelict we were after.

It was early in the afternoon, and Borden dropped into my cabin after a session

of small arms drill on deck. I was listening on the wireless. I had been doing that, off and on, for two days now.

One ship, the British cruiser Wiltshire, I guessed, was sending out calls every hour or so in code. These calls did not vary, until an answer came for the first time early this morning. Then the cruiser tuned down her spark a bit and started a long conversation with the other craft—all Greek to me.

After a while I gave it up, and turned to Borden who was watching me curiously, sitting on the bunk and filling his pipe. As usual we began to discuss the Dunstan, with Terry in the role of oracle.

"There's something quare about it, either way you take it, Dick," he observed puffing at his pipe. "It doesn't shtand to rason that whin a new passenger ship passes us fifty knots out from th' strait, reelin' off her fifteen knots as swate as can be, with only a mild sea runnin' and her in th' very track of th' Australian boats, she'd go down with all hands without a worrd av warnin' from th' wireless."

This was old ground, but Terry seemed to have something up his sleeve.

"What do you mean by 'either way you take it'?" I asked him.

"I mane, Dick," he explained heavily, "that th' Blue Belt line has no business in these waters. An' why were there no passingers by th' decks av her whin she passed? An' why is th' king's ship Wiltshire running about as if her rudder was bewitched?"

"If the liner's skipper was new to these waters he might have struck a reef along the Milky Way here," I hazarded. The Milky Way is a stretch of shore where the surf combs over the rocks miles from land and churns the sea white in heavy weather.

"An' he might not. Sure, th' man had his charts, an' he was dead in th' shteamer track, wasn't he? A drunken shtoker could av brought her into th' strait safely an' gone to shlope over it, at that." Borden shook his head gloomily. He is a

religious man, and has odds and ends of scripture at his tongue's end. "'For as th' wind goeth over it, it is gone, an' th' place thereof shall know it no more,'" he quoted. "It is a sad thing, lad, if that fine ship is lost with all hands."

"The sea takes its toll of ships, Terry."

"It is not th' sea that takes ship's like th' Dunstan. Sure th' fishing craft go down, an' souls with thim. But th' men who die have taken their toll av livin' from th' sea for wife an' family. They pay th' price, Dick. Whin a grrand boat like th' liner we passed goes down it is th' handiwork av men. Men like Tom Roth, an' his kind, that taint th' waters. 'Tis th' scum av th' sea they are. There's more than we know, in th' loss av th' Dunstan!"

"What's your idea then?" I asked him.

"Th' liner was carryin' cargo from Melbourne through th' strait. An' where wad she go, after passin' th' strait? Why, to London. There's little space for cargo on a ship like that, an' it was not beef or wool she was carryin'."

I began to get the drift of what Terry meant.

"You mean—"

"Th' Dunstan was a gold ship."

Borden's words enlightened me. They explained the presence of the British cruiser and the lack of passengers on the liner. The Wiltshire had come to escort the ship on her way. And the Blue Belt liner was taking gold sovereigns from Sydney or Melbourne to the London banks. There remained the riddle of her fate, and Terry had no answer for that.

I had taken up my record sheets of the wireless gibberish I had been listening to, before going to the bridge to make my daily report to the old man—Captain Godfrey—when some one poked his head in at the cabin door.

It was one of the boys, a youngster about eighteen and he had news.

"Derelict ahoy!" he hailed. "We've found it at last—over there on the star-board side. You can see it out there, about four miles away."

Both of us jumped up and peered out of the port. Sure enough, quite a distance away on our port bow—we were headed due east toward the shore, some sixty miles south of the entrance to the strait—was a gray hulk, with a single funnel standing, and a list to one side.

It looked like a large ship to me, larger than the gunboat. It was low in the water and the decks, as we could make out at that distance, were in a state of wreckage. The outline of the vessel puzzled me. It wasn't a tramp steamer, nor an ordinary passenger craft. I asked Borden what he made of it but he shook his head.

"Are we goin' to heave to, an' blow it to kingdom come?" he inquired of the boy.

"Not now, Terry," grinned the youngster. "It 'll be quite a little while yet before you point that bow gun of yours at it. The old man says we're going on after the liner, to try to pick up some of her boats, if we can.

"I heard him tell Kempton that it was more important to save life if we could than to send the old hulk to the bottom. The men of the watch think that the old man believes some of the liner's boats were washed ashore south of Cape Pilar."

It seemed foolish to me to leave the derelict that we'd come four thousand miles to destroy. There it lay not five miles away, a menace to any ships passing that way, yet we turned our backs on it. When I mentioned this to Terry, he grinned.

"Sure, d'you expect th' boat to take wings an' fly th' sea, Dick? Or maybe you wad like to tie it to th' spot so it wad not run away. Do not you know that th' craft will shtay there until we come back? Some currents might drift it a few miles, but we'll find it."

When I came on the bridge late that afternoon to make my report, the old man was busy in the chart-house, and I leaned against the rail and took things easy for a while. The derelict was 'way out of sight in back of us, and there was a stiff breeze coming from the same direction that was boosting the old ship along.

When I first came aboard I used to call the mess-deck the lunch-room, and the engine-room the power-plant, but things were different now. I got tired of being the ship's goat the second day out, and got Terry to name over everything to me. I made some slips after that, only not bad ones. Once Terry caught me saluting the bosun, and suggested that it would be better not to do it.

So, you see, I wasn't exactly a land-lubber now. I got to watching the commissioned officers off and on. The old man—Captain Godfrey—was a veteran who had seen better days. He was a stickler for discipline, and Lieutenant Kempton took after him.

The "lieut" bawled me out several times in formation because I had dirt on my pants, or had left a shirt around the deck. I didn't waste any love on him, not then. Later, when we had to stick by each other in trouble, we sized each other up differently. It was right that afternoon that we started off on our expedition. This is how it happened.

The Badger was heading pretty close inshore, with the usual vista of bare rocks and stunted shrubbery in view, when the old man and Kempton stepped out of the chart-house. I stood at attention, ready to make my report, but the old man was watching a schooner that was anchored inshore.

"By Jove, Kempton," said the old man, pointing her out, "I'll send a boat off to find out if the schooner has any news for us. She might have seen some wreckage alongshore, or sighted a boat. Take one of the cutters and a boat's crew, and see what you can find out. We'll stand by for you where we are. It's too shallow to work in by the schooner—I wonder what in damnation she's doing anchored there with a gale coming up."

"Yes, sir," said Kempton.

There was a jingle of bells as engines were stopped, a slow heave to the deck as the ship took the long roll of the swell, and the bosun's whistle mustered the watch aft to the boat's falls.

Kempton never turned a hair, although he must have known that dirty weather was coming up. I thought that it was sheer old-fashioned idiocy for Captain Godfrey to take all that trouble to question a beggarly schooner's crew for details of wreckage that might have belonged to the Dunstan. He certainly bore all the earmarks of a tyrant to me then.

"Take an extra man with you, Kempton," he snapped out. Then he saw me. "Here, Henderson—have you anything for me?"

"No, sir," I confessed. There were only those code scrawls, and they weren't for us. I wished the next minute I had mentioned them.

"Well, get into the cutter—you may need an extra man, Kempton."

That was how I came to be in the stern with Lieutenant Kempton, who loved me about as much I loved him, when the cutter put off to the schooner. The waves had grown bigger as soon as we were in the boat, so we couldn't see the schooner except when we were on top of one. Pretty soon we were near enough to make out the name painted on the bow, and I whistled to myself.

It was the *Bella Clara*.

"They must have good reasons for staying here," muttered Kempton as the cutter swung up near the other's rail. "There's a storm coming up, and they'll have to get out in a few minutes."

Only one man was on deck when we jumped to the rail and climbed over. He was at the wheel, and scowled at us blackly when we came up to him. I took up the rôle of spokesman, knowing Spanish.

"Where's Tom Roth?" I asked him. "We have business with him."

The fellow jabbered out something to the effect that Roth was not on the schooner, and that we'd better clear out.

"We'll go where we damn please," was Kempton's comment. "Ask him if he knows anything about the Dunstan."

I did so, but the Spaniard repeated his

warning, saying that a storm was coming up. This was my cue to tell the lieutenant what Borden had told me about the bad name of the schooner and what sort of a customer Roth was. Kempton heard me through without saying anything, and then declared that he was going down into the cabin to look things over, and for me to stay on deck.

Well, he had nerve all right. My own nerves were beginning to get into action, with the deserted deck of the schooner before me and the big swells curling along the sides. And things livened up right away.

In the first place the Spaniard at the wheel seemed to get a signal of some sort, for he gave a yell. A minute later a dozen men climbed out of the forecabin and began to swarm aft. I thought for a second that they were coming for me, but they jumped for the sails, taking out the reefs. At the same time some more of them got the anchor up.

"They're getting ready to clear out, Henderson!" called one of our men from the cutter.

I realized that myself, and felt that it was time to put Kempton wise to what was going on. There was a flapping of canvas and a snapping of reef-points as the wind began to puff into the sails. Out in the west, a bank of black clouds was scurrying toward us, with a white line of foam beneath where the waves were curling over. I didn't know much about navigation, but it was plain that it wouldn't do for the schooner to stay where it was. Kempton's situation made me anxious.

"Lieutenant Kempton!" I hailed down the companion. "The schooner is getting under way!"

There was no response. It might have been that he didn't hear me in the general racket, but I doubted that. It looked like foul play to me. I cast a hurried glance at our cutter. The men were rowing now, to keep up as the schooner heeled over and began to move. About a dozen feet separated the labor-

ing cutter from the fast-moving ship, the cutter being inshore and both ships moving north.

"You at the wheel," I yelled, forgetting my Spanish, "come around into the wind!"

If he heard me, he gave no sign. Instead, his teeth bared in a grin, and he let the wheel slip a few spokes. It was deliberate murder. The bow of the schooner fell off from the wind, and the whole side of the ship crashed against the cutter.

There was a shout of warning and a curse from our men. The side of the cutter was stove in under the impact, and I caught a glimpse of our men struggling in the water as they were swept astern.

The man at the wheel had deliberately wrecked the other craft, and perhaps sent half a dozen of my shipmates to their death. It was my first taste of the kind of thing that was to come.

There was no chance to try to reach the swamped cutter as it was swept astern of us. A big wave caught the *Bella Clara* full on the side and climbed over the rail, sweeping the deck up to the poop where we were standing. The man at the wheel bent every ounce of his strength to getting the ship around on its course and out of the trough of the waves.

Two or three more waves side-swiped us before our bow came around more into the wind, and we headed offshore just in time. When we did so, there were breakers a hundred yards away. Looking back to where our men were struggling, I saw that they all had found support on the upturned keel of the boat.

They rested there, powerless to move, and I swore involuntarily as I saw behind them the white surface of the Milky Way, where they were drifting. At the same time I saw that another cutter was putting out from the gunboat to their aid.

I turned on the man at the wheel, ready to knock him into the scuppers for what he had done. Instead of facing me,

he cowered over the wheel, afraid to release his grasp. As he did so I saw another come up from the companion, out of the corner of my eye. It was not one of the crew—they were up forward.

Then the man rushed me, bending low, and his fist caught me before I could dodge. The rush of a few steps from the companion gave him added weight, and six-footer that I am, I went over backward under the feet of the Spaniard. The outline of the other rose before me, and I felt a hand crush my windpipe. There was a numbing pain in the back of my neck. Then the curtain came down, and there wasn't any applause.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAPTURE.

WELL, what happened to me that night in the forepeak doesn't need to be told in detail. It was unpleasant, and it hadn't much bearing on the story. No; when I came to, as they say in the novels, I wasn't bound hand and foot, or gagged.

When the pain in the back of my neck had eased up a bit, and my head had stopped going around in circles with the pain as the center of the orbit, I sat up in the bunk where I was fixed and took an inventory of the forepeak.

About one-half the bunks along the sides were occupied by a varied assortment of unhealthy looking specimens. The stink of the place was a mixture of sweat, whisky, and filth. The only light came from a lantern standing on a cracker-box. By it I could make out that the men were asleep, and from the atmosphere of the place I guessed they had been having a time of it before they turned in.

I had been moving about uneasily in the blankets, and when I stopped the blankets went right on moving. That was enough for me, and I climbed down from the bunk, in spite of a splitting headache, and sat down on the box, tak-

ing the lantern between my knees. The stench of the cramped place and the motion of the ship made me feel faint again, and before I knew it I was sick—sick at the stomach.

This didn't help matters any, and I made up my mind that I would have a change of scenery at all costs. I was about as down-spirited and miserable as possible. No, I didn't wonder about the gunboat and where the schooner was—not then.

After putting out the lantern there wasn't a peep from any of the men, and I groped for the ladder in the dark. A minute later I crawled out on deck. The cold, salty night wind did me a lot of good, and the spray, dashing over the bow, cleared some of the nausea out of my head.

I began to wonder what had happened to Kempton. If there had been a man in the cabin, the same one that did for me, he might have put the lieutenant out of action. It had been one of those Charlie Chaplin stunts, with me and Kempton in the rôle of victims. Later, I found out that they got him more easily than me. We were both green at this slapstick stuff then, but we learned rapidly.

When my eyes got used to the dark I could make out that there were only two men on deck, one in the bow and the other at the wheel. I could see them against the foam when a wave churned alongside. The wind seemed to have died down a bit. From its direction, I judged that we were still heading northwest.

Well, I was too sick and low-spirited to do much planning, but it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to get into the after deck. Kempton was probably in there, dead or alive, and I wanted to find out what had happened to him. It was easy to get to the after companion. I crouched down along the rail and worked aft, where neither of the men on deck could see me. Every now and then part of a wave would slosh over the bul-

wark on me, but that did me more good than harm.

It was a curious sensation going down the steps into that cabin. The place was as quiet as the grave, and as dark as a pit. I waited by the foot of the companion for a few minutes, and then I began to suspect that I was alone there.

A few rats were scurrying around, and a door banged with the roll of the ship; still, there were no human noises—no snoring. I had about decided that I was the only one present when I heard a movement in one of the cabins a dozen feet away. It was a dull rustling, as though some one was turning over in bed or moving about. It was up to me to find out if it was Kempton.

"Kempton," I whispered.

The noise stopped, and there was silence for a space. I groped around until I located a door. It was locked, but the key was on my side. I turned it as carefully as I could and swung open the door. The first thing that struck me was a heavy odor of tobacco smoke, and then, a few feet away, a red spark glimmered out.

It began to look as if I had visited the wrong man, and I was going back out without leaving my card, when the lieutenant's voice came out of the dark. Lord, I was glad to hear it!

"Who the hell is that?" he asked.

I told him, and in another minute we had the door shut, and I was sitting on the bunk, having a heart-to-heart talk with him. He told me how they got him. It seemed that when he first came down into the cabin he thought it was empty, same as I did. Then, after poking around a bit and finding a couple of things that looked suspicious to him, he heard my warning shout, and made a break for the deck.

Just as he reached the companion, he was tripped up, and about half a dozen men smothered him under them. He was knocked up a bit in the struggle, and they chucked him in the cabin and locked him in, believing he would be safe there. He

had a good look at the man who seemed to be the leader of the bunch, and he described him as thick-set with very wide shoulders and a black beard.

"Did he have a bad cayuse eye?" I asked him.

"Yes, that's the man," Kempton admitted.

"That was Tom Roth," I told him, "the owner of this schooner. The helmsman lied when he said Roth wasn't on board. Roth must have been the man that rushed me on the poop. I can feel his fists on me yet." And I told Kempton how they got me, and about my sally from the forepeak. "What do you figure the gunboat's doing now?"

"Captain Godfrey would stay to pick up the men in the water, Henderson. It might take him an hour in this sea, and by that time the Bella Clara would be out of sight to the north'ards in the gloom. Then he would follow her course as nearly as possible during the night and try to pick us up at daybreak.

"You see, he would learn about our being on the schooner from the men who were swamped in the cutter. What I don't understand is why the schooner doesn't double on her course while she can. Roth—if that's his name—must know that he will be followed. If he keeps on this course, the Badger will get to us sometime during the day."

"That's true," I admitted; "but it's a bigger puzzle to me why they jumped us in the first place and swamped the cutter. They took a big chance then, without any good reason."

"The answer to that, Henderson, is in this cabin, stowed away behind locked doors. The Bella Clara has a lot of spoil from other ships on her."

That was news, but it didn't help our chances any. Here we were, two unarmed men in the cabin with half a dozen other rascals who were armed, not to speak of the crew, and we knew some thing that might hang a rope around them—especially with the Badger after them. I knew that, with all his faults,

Captain Godfrey would not give up the search for us until he had found us. I asked the lieutenant what he planned to do. His reply surprised me.

"Search the cabin," he said promptly.

When I thought of Tom Roth's hands on my windpipe and the guns those fellows were probably packing, I didn't like the idea. But Kempton had a reason for what he wanted to do.

"It's peculiar," he whispered, "but I believe there's no one in the cabin. Up to about midnight they were moving around and talking. Then they went on deck. After that the place was quiet, except for some rats. If Tom Roth is on the schooner, he's not in this part of it."

"Well, he's not in the forecabin with the crew," I told him. He shrugged his shoulders and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. There was nothing to do but follow him, as he was an officer.

At that, Kempton was right. We didn't dare light a match, but we felt our way around the place, and every compartment was empty—empty of men, that is. The whole place was chuck full of swag. Trunks and boxes were piled up on each other, and on one pile we ran across a whole silver service. At least, it was a punch-bowl and glasses of silver. Kempton puzzled over this for some time. He said that it felt like a war-ship's silver to him.

His guess seemed to hit the mark, because in the next compartment we discovered what seemed to be a lot of scrap-iron until Kempton identified them as machine-guns with their mounts, apparently torn from their fastenings on deck. He heaved one out of the pile, and spent what seemed like an hour examining it in the dark.

"A three-pounder quick-fire," he whispered to me, "and I'm damned if it hasn't seen service. This came from a war-ship, but it isn't an American type. Now, how in thunder did it come here?"

It was getting gray in the cabin then, and I left Kempton to muddle over his quick-firers. They were useless to us.

But I found half a dozen revolvers and automatics in the pile, and fished them out. Three of them still had cartridges in them, although they were badly rusted. It was an even bet that if they did go off, they would split the barrels. But the lieutenant fixed that.

As soon as we could see, he crept back into the cabin and unscrewed one of the lamps. The kerosene from this he poured over his handkerchief and swabbed out the barrels of the three pistols.

When he was satisfied with his job, he gave me the most shipshape-looking piece—a heavy automatic of a kind I'd never seen before, and kept two revolvers for himself. Then he explained our plan of action.

Now, Lieutenant Kempton wasn't long on brains. He was pig-headed, and couldn't see around a corner the way I could. But you had to give him credit for absolute courage. He never worried about the consequences as I did. He began to have a better opinion of me, too, and that helped our teamwork a lot. Of course, up to now, we had been the goats; but you can fool the best of them once.

This is the place for me to make a little speech of apology. I had classed Kempton and Godfrey as tyrants and stiff-necked brutes up to now. After the day on the schooner, I had to admit that the lieutenant was a man in all specifications, and later I revised my opinion of the old man. The next time I'm in a pinch, I want nothing better than an officer of the U. S. N. to back me up.

As soon as it was light enough to see things distinctly, Kempton and I took up our position at the foot of the companion, ready for our drive. What worried me most was the absence of Tom Roth and his bunch. You know, the living part of a schooner is at the bow and the stern—forecastle and cabin—with the hold between, and no means of communication except by the deck. We couldn't figure where Roth and the others would be, which was bad.

"Look here, sir," I whispered; "you'd better let me tackle the forepeak. I've been in there before and I know the lay of it. The men are mostly soused, anyway."

"No, Henderson," he came back gruffly. "What you will do is to follow my directions. Take care of the man at the wheel and cover the deck. Leave the rest to me."

"Suppose they shoot you up," I objected; "I'll be helpless on deck."

"Stow that!" he growled, "and come on."

Well, my heart was doing double time as we crawled up that companion and made our drive for the deck. I know now how the boys in the trenches feel when they hop the enemy. The deck was clear except for the two men I mentioned.

Kempton was out of the companion and down into the waist of the vessel before I reached the poop. In a couple of seconds I had the man at the wheel covered. The fellow in the bow started to make a break for the fore-companion, saw Kempton coming his way with a gun in each hand, and let out a howl.

By that time Kempton had vanished into the fore-castle. As he did so a couple of shots barked out from there, and I thought he was done for sure, down among those chaps in his white uniform, as conspicuous as hell, with them hidden in the bunks along the sides. But I was wrong. He got away with it, after all.

Pretty soon the crew began to climb out of the fore-companion, acting as if they were happy to leave it. After the last one of them came on deck, Kempton appeared, looking about as usual.

Then he lined them up by the galley and frisked them for weapons, throwing several knives overboard. I learned later that the fellow who had the gun stayed in the fore-castle, badly hurt. Oh, they were a choice lot, worse than any hangover squad I ever saw. But Roth was not there.

When it was broad daylight and we had the deck well policed, I made a thorough

search of the after-cabin without finding any one concealed there. We had made our drive—as the European battle reports have it—and captured several machine-guns and small arms, with a dozen prisoners; we had blasted the enemy out of their dugouts, but I wasn't satisfied.

If Tom Roth was on the ship, where was he? If he wasn't on the schooner, why had he left all that plunder in the cabin to the crew, and vanished at sea in the middle of the night?

CHAPTER V.

LIGHT IN DARKNESS.

BY and by the wind died down some more, and the *Bella Clara* barely moved through the water. We took advantage of this to get some ship's biscuits and beef from the galley, along with a pail of fresh water. Neither of us had tasted food for nearly twenty-four hours, and the stuff put new heart in us. We let the crew, rustle their own breakfast, and quiet settled down on the schooner.

Kempton took the wheel and sent the fellow forward. We tried to get him to say where Tom Roth was, but without success. Even when we shoved a gun into his beltline he shook his head, although he was gray with fear. He was more afraid of what might happen to him if he told us what we wanted to know.

All the time that Kempton was watching the sails and the horizon, or squinting at the men forward, I was thinking. Something was gnawing at my brain, and I couldn't get rid of it. It was about the events of the last few days.

In the first place, there was the mysterious disappearance of the *Dunstan*; then there was the British cruiser hanging around, and the conversation I had overheard in Punta between Moritz and one of her officers. Then came Tom Roth's attack on us on the schooner, and with it the puzzle of the loot in the cabin. Last of all, where was Roth?

During my search of the cabin, I had examined the silver carefully, only to find that the inscriptions on each piece had been scratched out until nothing could be read. The brass plate on a costly phonograph had likewise been defaced.

This plate I had pried off and taken to the deck. If we could make it out, it would afford a clue as to the ship the *Bella Clara* had robbed. I got out the plate and tried to decipher the inscription without success. By chance I turned it over and cursed myself for a fool.

The inscription had been stamped into the metal, with the outlines of the letters showing on the reverse side. I made out

H. M. S. PHAETON.

I called Kempton's attention to it, and he informed me that H. M. S. stood for "His Majesty's Ship," meaning his Britannic majesty, the King of England.

"Do you know of any such ship, sir?" I asked him.

"No, I don't. Hold on, though. The *Phaeton* was one of the light cruisers in the naval battle off the coast of Chile, when Von Spee won his victory. The cruiser was driven ashore on the rocks and abandoned by its crew, who boarded an English merchantman in the Gulf of Penas."

This information told me two things. First, the schooner had visited the wreck of the cruiser, and that accounted for the machine-guns we found. Second, the pickings from the cruiser had been in the schooner probably for months without an attempt being made to dispose of them. Roth had been occupied with other concerns.

Try as I would, I couldn't get the thing shaped in my mind. Sometimes I half saw the explanation, then everything blurred up again. If Roth and his men had left the *Bella Clara*, they must have had good reasons. Were those reasons connected with the gold on the *Dunstan*?

It didn't seem possible. How could a schooner waylay a liner, take off a shipment of specie, and whip the steamer

away into thin air? The idea wouldn't work. About this stage of the puzzle, Kempton broke in with a comment that put the whole matter in a new light.

"In the cabin where they put me at first, I found a coat hanging up. I scratched a match and searched the coat, finding a piece of paper in one of the pockets. Here it is, Henderson—see what you make of it."

I took it eagerly. It was a typewritten missive of only two lines, without address or signature:

Dunstan Friday between Evangelistas and strait.

Tasman Thursday night, same place.

Good Lord! That little paper changed the situation. It meant that, in all probability, the sister ship of the Dunstan was due to arrive at the spot where the unfortunate liner was lost. It was plain that the man who owned the coat knew the time of the ship's arrival. Had the coat belonged to Tom Roth? If so, the message must have come from elsewhere, for Roth was not one to understand the use of a typewriter.

"Get it, Henderson?" queried the lieutenant. "The time and place the Dunstan disappeared, all down in black and white, with the same data for the Tasman. Probably the latter is one of the Blue Belt liners."

"Yes," I groaned, "and to-day is Thursday."

Some memory-spot got into action in my brain, and I knew that I'd heard that name before. Tasman! I couldn't place it at first; then it came to me all at once. Moritz and the English officer had spoken about the Tasman that afternoon when I listened to them in Puntas. Only I had heard it as Tasmania. They were evidently expecting the ship.

"Look here, sir!" I exclaimed. "Just before we left the gunboat, I had been picking up messages in response to the code messages of the cruiser. That must have been the Tasman coming into range."

"What about her convoy, the Wiltshire?"

"The cruiser is watching the Badger. An English spy in Puntas, Moritz, has sicked them on to us. They suspect the gunboat, and while they are watching for us, the liner is headed for the place where the Dunstan disappeared."

Kempton's eyes flashed curiously.

"Do you think a spook ship is lying in wait for the liner, Henderson? What are you trying to dope out with those clues of yours—the paper and the brass plate? If you think a submarine caused the loss of the Dunstan, you are mistaken. No European submarine has been reported within five hundred miles of here—the trip is impossible."

"I know that, sir," I replied. "But we must try to save the Tasman from her sister's fate. The lives of hundreds of men, and the safety of a fine ship, are in danger."

"Well, we're hardly in the game, are we, Henderson? Two men marooned on a smuggler's schooner with a rebellious crew, and only four or five rounds of ammunition."

"The secret of what is going on is with us on this schooner, sir," I told him. "If we can only piece it out—"

But he cut me short with an oath. It was late in the afternoon then, and we were slipping along at about five knots. Another two hours, I calculated, would get us into the track of the Australian ships heading for the strait. We were within sight of the mountains that stand as rocky sentinels on either side of the strait. The northwest breeze had blown us inshore.

It was then that we sighted the gunboat. Far off on our port beam a column of smoke was curling up from a gray speck on the horizon. Kempton saw it first.

"There's the Badger, Henderson!" he shouted. "Stand by to come about. We'll go off to meet it. Get that crew to bend over the jib and pass that fore-boom tackle across."

It was no easy matter, but with a good lot of cursing and our revolvers, we got the men to do what we wanted, and the schooner came about. The sails pounded until they filled with the steady wind, and we felt the lift of the boat as it gained headway. Sure enough, the gray speck was the gunboat, heading our way now. She had come after us, just as Kempton had said she would.

Such things happen queerly. No sooner had I taken my mind for a minute off the mystery of the danger threatening the *Tasman* than I saw it all as clearly as if it was written in a book.

Yes, I saw how the *Dunstan* met her end, and what would happen to her sister if we did not prevent it.

It was so plain and simple, I knew it was the truth.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TASMAN'S DANGER.

AT first Captain Godfrey was all for making prisoners of the schooner's crew. He had learned the details of how we got on the vessel from the men he had picked up in the water, and he wanted to call them all to account for it.

Kempton pointed out to him that Roth and his henchmen were the men who had actually attacked us, and not the schooner's crew. As for the collision with the cutter, it would be difficult to prove that was not an accident. The old man was mad clear through, and said that he was going to put an end to the deviltries of the schooner, with her cabin full of plunder from other ships, and ordered the vessel to heave to near us.

Meanwhile one of the petty officers hurried up from my flivver wireless, which he had been trying to work, and reported that a ship was wanting to say something to us. Captain Godfrey ordered me to take over the wireless, and it was just as well that I did so.

The other fellow's sender was a whopper, and I recognized the bellow of the

Wiltshire, which I had listened to before, although they had tuned down their spark to get in touch with us. I scribbled down the message, grinning to myself as I did so with thinking what the old man would say to it.

It was from Captain Pemberton of the Wiltshire, and it ordered us out of the steamer-track for that night. As it happened, we were dead in the path of a ship headed for the strait.

Captain Godfrey was in the chart-house with Lieutenant Kempton when I took him the message. He flushed and fairly choked with anger when he got the meaning of it. Then he cursed out Pemberton and the cruiser in a way that would have made Terry Borden happy for a day if he had heard it.

"It's on account of the *Tasman*, sir," put in Kempton, who could see a hole in a wall if you pointed it out to him. "She's another of the Blue Belt gold-ships, due here to-night, probably with the cruiser as convoy. Pemberton wants a clear field. If he ran across a suspicious craft, he might take a shot first and investigate afterward."

"Suspicious craft!" snapped the captain. "Why in the name of all that's asinine would that dog-eared Britisher suspect the *Badger*. I'll shape my course where I choose even if Pemberton is convoying all the gold in Australia."

Kempton nodded at me. "Get Henderson to tell you why the cruiser suspects us—he knows."

This was my chance. I did a little hasty figuring. We were now about fifteen miles southwest of the *Evangelistas* and about as far from Cape Pilar, at the entrance to the strait.

If the *Tasman* was on time with her schedule, as I suspected from the wireless, she would pass within a few miles of us, and heave to until daylight, when she could make the strait.

I outlined in a few words the interview between Moritz and the Britisher I had overheard in *Puntas*, with the news that our consular-agent was away at the time.

I explained that the Badger hardly looked like an American war-ship, since the gunboat had been captured from Spain and was modeled on Spanish lines.

"The result of all this," I concluded, "is that the cruiser is beating around for us somewhere to the south, while the liner is coming on alone. It may be hours before the Wiltshire can come up. Then it will be too late."

They both looked up at these words.

"What do you mean by that, Henderson?" asked Kempton curiously.

Remember that I had it all figured out in the back of my brain by now—about the Dunstan and the things we had found on the schooner—but I had to get it all across to the two officers. I had to! Millions in gold and the lives of hundreds of men were at stake.

"Shortly after dark to-night, sir," I began, "the Tasman will be anchored at the same spot where the Dunstan disappeared. Unless we prevent it, she will meet the same fate that was the lot of her sister ship a week ago. The trap is all set."

The old man stared at me, chewing his mustache.

"What do you think this danger is?" he said after a minute. "The sea is empty except for us, and the cruiser. We have Roth's schooner alongside of us. There is not another ship within five hundred miles of the Tasman."

"Yes there is, sir," I told him. "There's one headed for the liner now, in the dusk—the same that did for the first ship. We can't see it, but it's there—"

"There's nothing afloat near us, except the schooner and the derelict," snapped Kempton.

"That's just it, sir. There isn't any derelict—never was one."

"By God, the man is crazy!" spluttered the old man. "We all saw that derelict when we passed it yesterday."

"Yes, sir; and that hulk you saw sank the Dunstan—and now the liner's gold is on board. That's where Tom Roth and

his men are. And it's no derelict, because its engines are working, and there's a gun or two on the deck that can shoot six-inch shells."

They were too taken aback to answer, and I hurried on:

"That's the explanation of all this mystery, Captain Godfrey. We never suspected the derelict because it lay right under our eyes. Instead, the British cruiser has been chasing us, and we have been after the Bella Clara, which acted as a tender for the derelict, taking men and supplies off to it from shore. That's the craft that's laying for the Tasman to-night."

Even in the anxiety of getting the idea across, I felt a spasm of satisfaction with myself. It was my big time at last, and the spotlight was turned my way. I had been the landlubber, the ship's goat, for weeks.

But I was the only man on two war-ships that had got next to what was going on in these waters. I noticed that Captain Godfrey's eye was beginning to light up, and he nearly tugged off his mustache. The idea hadn't penetrated yet to Kempton's bomb-proof of a brain.

"Let's hear it all, Henderson," urged the old man.

"It goes back to the naval battle off the Chile coast, sir," I explained. "The British third-class cruiser Phaeton was run ashore after the battle. The crew abandoned her as worthless—as she was, for war purposes. Tom Roth's beach-combing schooner got wind of it, and looted the Phaeton.

"After they had chucked overboard some of the débris and scrap-iron, the vessel floated off the rocks. Roth must have had some idea then of what could be done with the cruiser, or else somebody other than Roth did, because some of the naval deserters in the gang got steam up and worked the craft down the coast, where she drifted around for months, in and out of the hidden bays. It was then that the merchant skippers reported the drifting derelict.

"It's not hard to figure out what happened after that, sir," I went on. "Nobody paid any attention to the craft, which seemed to be a drifting derelict. Here Roth and his men had an armed ship in their hands. They got news of the Dunstan's coming, as the note we found on the schooner proves, and lay in wait for the ship off the entrance to the strait.

"A few shots disabled the liner. Then they forced the ship's officers to send off the gold to them, on threat of sending the liner to the bottom. Perhaps the Dunstan's people did it; or they may have made a run for it, and were sunk in that way. It was a devilish trap. We will never know what happened, unless from the scoundrels on the cruiser."

"How do you know Roth is on board the derelict?" inquired Kempton.

"Last night, sir," I told him, "you heard a dozen men in the cabin of the schooner and recognized Roth among them. When we got the vessel into our hands early this morning, they were gone. Now, we must have passed the derelict in our course, and Roth and his men put off in two of the small boats which were missing this morning.

"You see, when you went down into the cabin and took a look around, Roth had to keep you from getting back to the gunboat, hence the attack on us. Probably he figured that it would be a long time before the gunboat could catch the Bella Clara—not thinking we could get control of the schooner."

"How could they get the information about the gold-ships' arrival?" asked the old man, puzzled.

"Somebody higher up, sir. The fact is, they got it. We know that from the note on the schooner."

"How the devil can we know that the derelict really can steam?" demanded the captain, half to himself.

"It's pretty clear, sir. If you think of it, we searched all this part of the coast for a week without finding a trace of the craft. Then all at once it appears and lays right in the middle of things. How

did it get there? No currents could drift it about like that. It came out of a hiding place in the coast, and it steamed out."

You see, I had all the facts before me this morning on the schooner, but I couldn't quite make them match. The answer was so simple, it was hard to hit. The wreck, lying so openly in front of us, made it hard to suspect it. At that, there was a weak point in my reasoning. If the gang had cleaned up ten or twelve million in gold from the Dunstan, why should they want to risk their necks for another haul under the noses of two war-ships? Perhaps they doped it out that the cruiser would keep the gunboat away from the scene. Or they might have made the play in sheer recklessness, with no more to lose and a few thousand pounds of gold to gain.

Captain Godfrey strode to one of the portholes and peered out. It was a clear night, but nothing could be made out—no sign of other ships. Somewhere out there the liner was making its way to the strait, and the derelict was lying in wait for it.

As we looked, we saw a dart of flame some miles away, and heard the dull boom of a big gun.

CHAPTER VII.

A MATTER OF GUNS.

THE gun-shot settled the matter. For a few minutes the Badger was the busiest ship I had ever seen. The old man was chewing his mustache and swearing in a pleased way to himself as he snapped out his orders to get the men to quarters and get up a full head of steam.

I had hoped they would keep me on the bridge as a sort of general adviser, but nothing of the kind happened. The first time Kempton caught sight of me, he yelled out for me to get to my station at the wireless along with some cuss words that made me jump.

I scrambled down the ladder from the bridge to the deck, and in the gloom I made out the forms of men grouped around the bow gun, and heard Terry Borden telling them where to put some shells that had come up from the ammunition-room.

The decks were dark except for the binnacle light, and I had to feel my way to the passageway, bumping into men who were running about trying to get to their stations. My heart was doing double-time by now. My fingers slipped as I tried to fit on my leather head-dress in my cabin. A moment's listening told me there was nothing doing at the wireless, and I went to the port and looked out.

The motion of the ship told me we were making speed. Every now and then—blam! blam!—the big gun would go off somewhere ahead of us, and after a while there was the rattle of a quick-firer. By craning my neck out of the open port, I could make out the flashes. There was a big flash and roar off on our port bow, and then a series of little darts of flame three or four miles away on the starboard bow. Two ships were firing at each other, and the one with the big gun seemed to be stationary, while the quick-firer was moving away steadily.

What were the ships? There were no lights showing that might have served as a clue. Was the big gun on the derelict, or was it the British cruiser? And where was the liner?

By and by the big gun scored a hit on the little fellow. I saw it—the red glare of an exploding shell and heard the dull crash. After that the quick-firer was silenced. One of the two was getting the worst of it, only which one?

By now I began to suspect that the cruiser was not among those present. If the Englishman had been engaged in a fight like this, he would have brought more guns into play. No, the two vessels were the liner and the ship that was lying in wait for her—the derelict. And it looked to me as if the quick-firers were

mounted on the liner, which was now disabled.

In that case it was up to us to do something quickly, and I wondered what the old man was planning to do.

There was a lull now, while the Badger plowed ahead at her full twelve knots, shaking and snorting at the strain of it. On the fore-deck I knew that Terry was crouching over his five-inch gun, his hand on the elevating gear, as he had done a hundred times in practise, praying to his Irish saints that he might have a chance to get into the fight. Before the night was out, Terry was to have his hands full.

You know how the stage of a theater is darkened in an exciting moment, and then the spotlight is whisked on, showing somebody dead, or a pair of burglars robbing a safe. It was something like that when the searchlight on the bridge of the Badger flared out into the darkness. It groped around for a couple of seconds; then it lit on the ship that had been firing with the big gun. And I could hardly keep from whooping with delight.

There it was, plain as if in the spotlight at a show, my derelict, with the wrecked decks and rusty ironwork. The light traveled over it from bow to stern, and showed a dozen men grouped on the deck and bridge. There was smoke coming from the funnel, and the craft was moving slowly across our bow about two miles away. I had been right in my guess.

Then things began to happen. There was a blam! and flash from the derelict, and a shell went over us. It gave a weird sort of whee-ee as it did so, and I tingled from toes to the back of my neck. Then our bow gun roared out, and the fight was on.

In a minute we knew that there were two pieces on the derelict that were in working order. Our five-incher in Terry's hands worked quicker than either of them, however, and we had the advantage of the spotlight, which must have blinded them.

But not for long. One of their shells

scored a hit on us somewhere up near the bridge. There was a sickening roar and crackle, and the search-light faded and died out. The two quick-firers on the bridge were still in commission, and they added their bark to the growl of the five-incher. All we could see to aim by was the flash of their guns.

Terry told me later that, one being in the bow and the other in the stern, they outlined the length of the vessel clearly for him. Anyway, he began to land on them. We could see the red flares of the explosions on the derelict. By and by flames broke out on it, and before long we could see what was happening on the derelict.

Two groups of men were standing about the guns, working them. In the superstructure the fire was gaining on them, and they must have known the game was up. A couple of small boats had been on the deck of the derelict, but these were shattered by Terry's shells. He had the range now to a yard, and every one of his shells burst on board. We had been hit about half a dozen times, but our engines were still going, and there was no confusion on board.

We saw something else when the flames mounted a bit higher. About three miles away was the Tasman standing by. Apparently the liner was not badly injured, but a lucky shot from the derelict must have crippled her engines. She made no move to get away.

My wireless was muttering in code, and I had to get back from the port while I listened in. There was nothing to be made out of it, but it wasn't hard to figure out that the cruiser had sighted the glow of flames and wanted to know what was doing.

I had to smile to myself as I thought of how worried Pemberton must be. Here he had been ordered to convoy the liner, and but for a little Yankee gunboat his charge would have been held up, stripped of her gold, and perhaps sent to the bottom to join the Dunstan.

There was a cessation of gunfire as the

wireless message twinkled in, and when I could get to the port again I saw the reason for it. The derelict was in a bad way. A shell had put one of her guns out of action, and the vessel had tilted so far to one side that the other could not be trained on us. The battle was over.

Along the deck of the outlaw vessel about twenty men were grouped, and others were crawling to the rail. It looked as if they were doomed—the flames pressing at their backs, and the ship in a sinking condition.

It was then that Kempton showed me again the stuff he was made of. He had got two of our cutters and pulled off to the wreck. In the red glare I could see him collecting the men as they jumped from the rail. By this time the gunboat was standing by, a few ships' lengths away, and we could see everything that passed on deck.

Kempton scrambled up somehow and vanished into the superstructure, reappearing with a wounded man. And then I saw a figure beside him that I seemed to recognize. A suit that had once been white linen, and a curly black beard—yes, I placed it after a minute.

It was Señor Moritz, the man I had thought an English spy, the chief of the smugglers at Puntas. I knew then where the information as to the coming of the gold-ships had come from. And likewise who the man higher up was. It was Señor Moritz.

Kempton was just in time. When he and Moritz and the wounded man had pulled away in one of the cutters the derelict began to settle, a loud sizzling showing that the water had reached the part that had been on fire. I groaned as I realized that with the hulk all the gold from the Dunstan was going down.

I need not have worried if I had known the truth of the matter. We learned it from Pemberton the next day, when the old man turned over our prisoners to him, after the Wiltshire had come up at top speed. The Englishman explained that he had got a wireless from

another cruiser in the Atlantic saying that the Dunstan was safely on her way to London.

The liner had been attacked by the derelict just as the Tasman was, only with better luck. She had sheered off and made a run for it, escaping with a busted wireless and several men wounded. Of course, with the pirate lying at the entrance to the strait, she could not

return, and it was impossible to get in touch with Pemberton. So she made her way around Cape Horn.

Well, I wasn't the ship's goat any more, as Terry told me when we had a good chin over the whole affair. He was happy, all right, as he had settled his reckoning with Roth. Our work was over, and we headed back to the quiet, peaceful waters of Mexico.

(The end.)

A Plain Black Tie

by Thane Miller Jones



"NOT guilty," lied the accused man glibly with a confident glance at the burly attorney Manovitch, who answered from his place at the attorneys' table with a swift, reassuring nod.

"Have you an attorney to defend you?" asked the tired judge.

"No, your honor, I am too poor to—"

The tired judge turned to Mr. Nichols, the prosecuting attorney.

"What do you say, Mr. Nichols?"

The prosecuting attorney carelessly nodded; then half rising:

"I move that the court assign an attorney to represent the accused from the attorneys present in court."

The judge cast his eyes furtively over some papers on his desk. Then he glanced down at the attorneys' table and asked:

"Mr. Williams, will you kindly act?"

Williams, a bald man with an abrupt mustache, bowed obediently, then met the eye of the burly attorney Manovitch who smiled.

The accused man turned with a relieved grin to a pallid fellow-culprit who crouched next him in the dock. The pallid prisoner whispered sullenly:

"You're 'looked after'—but me—"

His drawn face expressed sheer terror. There were reasons why the boss—Mano-

vitch—might let him go to the pen. He had, the day before, got a swift hint of it. We-e-ll, he had meant to play the game—but there was Mamie the Coke—

The judge was speaking. "Yes, Mr. Williams, I can give you till to-morrow afternoon to prepare your defense. There is"—he glanced at the clerk's docket—"this Whalen case to dispose of. But I will first ascertain as to Whalen's plea and as to an attorney. James Whalen, stand up!"

The pallid prisoner rose, and glanced in a wild, swift appeal to where Manovitch sat hunched over the attorneys' table. But the great underworld's legal adviser stared unrecognizingly at him with his narrowed eyes.

Jim Whalen winced. He was not then to be "looked after." "Damn you!" he snarled in silent rage and terror.

Manovitch sensed the noiseless curse and, grinning, shrugged his heavy shoulders. Whalen must go.

The world of lawlessness has its own laws. Booty-taxes are not with immunity to be evaded. Taxes are as essential to organized lawlessness as they are to society. Whalen sent to the pen would have a salutary effect on the other wolves.

Whalen gulped; then pleaded a hopeless "not guilty" to the verbose indictment.

"Are you represented by an attorney?" asked the tired judge, glancing at his notes again.

"No—I ain't got no money to pay no mouthpiece—"

The judge glanced furtively at Manovitch, then back to his notes again. Then he understood.

No lawyer had been "suggested." The judge coughed, listened to the usual motion from the prosecuting attorney, then cast his eye selectingly down the long rows of lawyers. One of the young men would do.

There was an amused conjecture on the faces of the lawyers. When an attorney was to be assigned who had not been suggested, the matter became a joke. There

was no pay in the job, and of course it was understood that no lawyer with any practise would be assigned. Some of the younger lawyers recognized in the appointment an opportunity to get their names before the public and many attended court for this reason.

And Newell P. McCollough attended, though he was not a young lawyer by some thirty-five years. Since he had dazedly watched his large practise dwindle away from him, twelve years before, he had waited for his chance again.

The judge's eye came at last to rest speculatively upon his stooped shoulders, his mild, supreme-court-judge face, his lack-luster eyes that held no vigor. He recalled how two years before he had selected McCollough to defend that woman charged with vagrancy; how his meager, abstracted defense had been beaten down by the virulent district attorney, and how—following a conviction, though the guilt was doubtful—he himself had interposed under the probation laws. He recalled, too, what a giant McCollough had been at the bar before that mysterious blight had wrought its ruin. He was become a grotesque parody on N. P. McCollough, the corporation lawyer.

The judge's eyes passed on, seeking some young attorney; then came back to McCollough. Smiling whimsically and glancing with anticipatory mirth along the rows of intent faces, he announced:

"Mr. McCollough, will you please assist the court by representing the prisoner?"

A broad flicker of amusement pulsed in the faces of the lawyers.

McCollough rose, trembling and flushed. It was a great moment. His meager frame stiffened at the lax jaws of the covertly grinning bar. There had been a day when instead of that derisive grin, respect would have greeted his name. He vaguely admitted to himself a painful preoccupation of mind these twelve years back but—he would show them! He had never lain down under his misfortune. He

had been crushed down. He had forgotten more law than most of them ever knew. But—unfortunately—he *had* forgotten it.

“Er—certainly, your honor. I have—er—not as yet had an opportunity to consult my client.”

At this naive expression of the obvious, the tired judge repressed a smile, and responded with a slightly exaggerated courtesy:

“Till the morning?”

“Yes.”

Jim Whalen in the dock studied the face of the judge, noted the leering flashes of witticism rippling down the rows of diverted attorneys, blanched at the blank, heavy face of Manovitch—and shuddered. It was all over, but the farce of a trial. He was to go to the pen. God! There was Mamie.

McCullough approached him, fussily professional. His thin face was suffused with nervous, hectic vigor. As client and attorney passed for a consultation into one of the big empty jury rooms, Whalen cast a swift glance over his shoulder to where Manovitch stood whispering to the prosecuting attorney. He saw them both glance at him and grin. When he turned again to the solicitous McCullough his face was as white as the walls of the jury-room.

An hour later the prisoner slouched back to the jail in the custody of an attendant. A nondescript person murmured a message from Manovitch as Whalen slunk past: “After a year—parole. You gotta go quiet—”

Whalen snarled ferociously as he slouched on. He paid no heed to McCullough’s reassuring smile from the doorway.

From the little woman with the patient eyes who greeted him when he returned home much later than usual for dinner McCullough concealed his exultation under a professional nonchalance. Sipping his tea, he smiled quietly across the table.

“Oh, by the way, I’m defending a man named Whalen—accused of breaking and entering—”

The little woman’s fond eyes beamed with affectionate pride; then suddenly filled.

“Newell!”

“Eh?”

“I mean—yes? And do you think you can clear him.”

The fiction—forgotten for the moment—that this was a daily occurrence was bravely maintained. He was a great lawyer and she was his proud wife. Her love held an almost maternal quality. He must be shielded from the world—and from the effects of that awful thing that had happened to them. She assisted at the fiction of business because she knew it was good for him. She would have assisted in any delusion of his maimed life that made for a little happiness where so much of happiness was deserved. And she knew that his great passion now was to make things easier for her. And she assisted him, too, in this passion.

He pursed his judicial lips. “Oh—I don’t know. H-m. There are, I believe, strongly incriminating circumstances.”

“My!” The interest in her sweet voice was not for Whalen accused of breaking and entering—whatever that meant.

“Eh?—yes. But the prisoner must have the benefit—the full benefit—of every reasonable doubt!” This with the democratic ferocity of a magna charterer.

“Oh, of course!” she hastened.

All that afternoon McCullough poured—undisturbed!—over his law books. Toward evening he carried several volumes home, hugged to his lean side.

His wife had brushed anew an already too-well brushed suit of rusty black. A frayed white tie, freshly ironed, was submitted for inspection. The worn part was carefully mended.

Newell P. McCullough kissed his wife awkwardly. A long look passed between them. It was as though the weary, undaunted soul of the white-haired woman was sending a message “How goes it?”

to her beloved. He did not smile an answer, but the muscles about his mouth tightened and he threw back his great head in the old way she loved.

There were no children—at home. The daughter of whom they seldom spoke nowadays was an unforgettable, crushing memory. When reminiscence interwove the lost girl into their speech, elliptics were painfully employed.

It was not as though she were dead. It was not as though they knew that she was at rest. Fierce-eyed, wayward, intolerant, impatient of all restraint, she had at sixteen flung herself, a rebel, from their placid, cultured life. Inexplicably degenerate, she had sullenly thrust aside every arm held out to her.

McCullough, as he informed his wife, had, however, kept more or less in touch with her, and she was partially rehabilitated. He had three years before gone to a western city and looked her up. Found her, as he recounted to his wife, doing very nicely. Had gone into journalism. Was quite a hand to write for the papers. Smart as a steel trap! Had been a little foolish, but—he had great hopes that she would make them proud of their child yet.

In his office as he sat thinking over what he had told the little woman he remembered her tears and her smile. It repaid him for an enforced absence of four days. He had then suddenly remembered something, seized his hat and gone down to that part of the city that he hated. There was rent to pay and—the daughter must be physically comfortable.

She had greeted him with noisy joviality. He had gone home and silently smoothed her mother's gray hair as he kissed her. At any rate she did not know—*that!* Thus he gained from month to month a pale happiness in shielding the mother.

And now an ambition to win this Whalen case to which he had been sardonically assigned filled McCullough's thoughts. Office work would follow an exhibition of forensic acumen. And

money was badly needed. Through the haze of his beclouded powers he struggled for two women, one who kept him alive and one who kept him dead.

As he bent over his law books he suddenly realized that he had meant to go down—there. She might be in sore need again. He glanced sharply at his quiet wife. She smiled mildly and gently patted his arm.

“Don't you think you had better come to bed now, Newell? Get a good night's sleep, for you will be occupied in court to-morrow—I think you said?”

This simple subtlety soothed the old lawyer to a sad benignity. Yes! Court work was to be more and more an everyday affair.

He placed a careful mark in his law book and went to bed.

The evidence for the prosecution on the trial of James Whalen was wholly circumstantial; but Whalen had a bad record—two convictions for house-breaking and one for aggravated assault.

The prosecuting attorney closed the State's case with quiet confidence and turned his attention furtively to the brief in the next case.

McCullough's opening for the defense brought his attention back with a jerk. What? Was the old hick going to call the prisoner to testify on his own behalf? It was a dangerous practise, and doubly dangerous unless guiding counsel were skilful to forefend the accused from a grilling cross-examination. Many a man had been convicted out of his own mouth, after an exhausting half-day's bombardment had beaten his defences to a pulp.

McCullough's style of advocacy was of a decade past. His thin voice was high-pitched, his gestures elocutionary; his sentences carefully rounded, his English chaste. Futility loomed large in his vague generalizations.

Clever court lawyers do not, in these matter-of-fact days, indulge in conscious eloquence. Trial by Oratory is as dead as trial by Ordeal. They converse, they

chat. They buttonhole the jury as man to man, and, without driving their contentions home with wordy sledges, they subtly suggest, assist a half-formed thought, insinuate a doubt; damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer, and without sneering, teach the jury to sneer. Listen to a rattling good criminal lawyer on his next murder case.

So the court smiled—a little pityingly—at McCollough's grand periods. The whole performance was as out of place as a learned medical lecture in a sick-room.

McCollough sat down, feeling some of the vigor of the old, unbroken days when this twelve-year-old preoccupation had not come to harass him.

A moment later he rose and called an unimportant witness. With painful conscientiousness he conducted the examination in chief, then as carefully sought to clean up the wreckage resulting from the hurricane of the cross-examination. Another minor witness having been examined, McCollough importantly announced: "I will call the prisoner, James Whalen."

The underworld's silent attorney, Manovitch, intent near the end of the attorneys' table, snarled a noiseless menace at the sullen, pallid Whalen as the latter raised his arm to take the oath. A defiant, desperate glare answered him.

Then Whalen was going to talk, was he? Would he *dare*? Manovitch must prevent that at any cost.

The examination had reached the point as to the entrance effected through the east dining-room window. We have the advantage of the stenographer's report:

QUESTION: "The witness, Burne, has stated that the lower pane of the east dining-room window had been cut. Now you've explained to the court and jury how you chanced along shortly before this. Were you near enough to see—"

Mr. Nichols objects. Leading. Objection sustained. Court suggests changing form of question.

Q. "Very well, your honor: What do you know of your own knowledge as to the cutting of the glass?"

A. "I know who cut the glass. I'm wise to the whole job. And I'm goin' to snitch! I saw Le—"

As the witness began his answer, Manovitch stirred uneasily. The prosecuting officer glanced hastily at him, then rose.

"I object—stop!" Then, more leisurely: "I do not, at present, your Honor, see what relevancy—on the trial of the prisoner—er—"

McCollough scathingly: "Relevancy? Surely if I can produce witnesses—and the prisoner is a witness—to show that he did not in point of the fact break and enter, but that some one else did—"

The court: "Certainly, if—"

Manovitch shot a final look at Whalen. The little rat would, then, would he? He felt that he was going safely to the pen, did he? Manovitch would show him! With sudden determination the burly attorney half rose to his feet.

Mind you, he had no ostensible connection with the case.

The court stirred in mild astonishment. Wild surmise grew in Whalen's dilating pupils.

Manovitch spoke to the judge: "Will the court pardon me—the stenographer appears ill—"

The judge glanced quickly at the little man whose pencil had been racing jerkily over his book. As he did so the stenographer, with a swift look at Manovitch, dropped his pencil—the long point snapped—and put an uncertain hand to his head.

The court: "Are you ill, Mr. Fry?"

"A trifle dizzy, your Honor. I—"

The court: "Perhaps we'd better take ten minutes' recess."

The machinery of the law slowed down. Attorneys strolled toward the library, reaching for pipes and cigarettes.

Whalen frantically beckoned to McCollough and began a tense whispering. McCollough raised a forbidding arm.

"I am not permitted to consult with you while you are on the witness stand," he stated.

The judge, who had paused on his way

to his little room behind the judicial throne, nodded slowly and muttered: "Honorable—to a fault. After all, I suppose it does pay—somehow—perhaps."

He sighed—a little—at the wraith of a lost innocence. His god was expediency—and expediency being an earthy god can be approached. An approachable business man, yes; but an approachable judge—the very phrase conveys a sinister meaning. In these modern days how can a man with growing obligations avoid lending a furtive ear to— The judge sighed and went into his room.

Fortunately he represents a very small proportion of the bench. Just enough to keep alive the clamor for the recall of judges.

Jim Whalen hungered for a word—just one word—with Manovitch, but that burly attorney had his broad back toward him, whispering earnestly to the prosecuting attorney.

Court resumed.

Nichols arose. "May it please your honor, in the light of—er—developments and after consultation with my learned brother McCollough, I have—er—decided that the State discontinue this prosecution. I move that a *nolle prosequi* be entered."

The tired judge nodded briefly. "Mr. Clerk, make the entry. Case withdrawn. Prisoner, stand up. You are discharged from further attendance upon this court. You are free."

McCollough, who had not, as a matter of fact, been consulted, was quite dazed at this unexpected turn of events. Of course, he had felt all along that his method of conducting the defense was battering down the State's case pretty effectually, but he had not looked for this sheer confession of defeat from the prosecuting attorney. It was a feather in his cap!

He warmly grasped Manovitch's outstretched hand.

"Congratulations on your able defense!" grinned the burly attorney.

McCollough beamed. He wished now that he had consented to his wife's timidly expressed wish to be present. Here was his old, dimly remembered efficiency coming back! Victory!

Two business men padded silently down the aisle. "That McCollough is surely coming back to his old form. He was astray there for a while. Trouble in his family, I guess. But he's great stuff now! Some speech, eh? I must give him a bunch of business I've got piled up. Don't get satisfaction from that agency. Need a man to take a case, if necessary, right up to the Supreme Court."

"'Bout it," agreed the other.

Trial by Oratory still impresses—the bystander.

McCollough reached Whalen's side. The hand he reached for was lifeless in his grasp. He peered, puzzled, into the man's livid face. The lips were framing mumbling phrases.

"I wasn't wise that Manovitch could fix it that way," he whimpered. "Now they got me. I'm—I'm as good as bumped off. I doped it out that I'd be safe over there until things—I'm a dead un. And there's Mamie."

McCollough patted him encouragingly on the back.

"Why, man, you're free! They can't put you on trial again for this. No man can legally be placed in jeopardy a second time. It is one of our glorious constitutional liberties!"

The man laughed with snarling, bloodless lips. "Jeopardy, hell!" he panted. Then, bethinking himself of the simple old soul standing there, puzzled, he added: "You done all you could. That sure was a dandy line of talk—thanks. Good-by."

Late that evening Newell P. McCollough sat in slippers before the tiny coal grate. The soft light from the fire flickered over his wife's silver hair. She sat silently knitting. Her heart was full of a great pride—and a great wistfulness.

Her husband explained: "These criminal cases though not directly lucrative

tend to promote civil business. Maillard, the nail man, sent one of his clerks around this afternoon with considerable commercial business. Kept me busy making a start on it all the afternoon. I had meant to—er—”

“ Meant to? That’s nice for a—a rainy day.”

“ Yes,” agreed the attorney. He understood the allusion.

The mother-yearning in the little woman’s eyes confused him. He blinked into the fire.

“ There should always be a home for one—one to—to come to—”

“ Yes,” he sighed.

She laid her knitting on the evening paper. As she did so an item caught her eye.

“ Newell!” she exclaimed. “ Wasn’t your client’s name Whalen — James Whalen?”

“ Yes, dear—what?”

“ Listen: ‘ With a bullet through his lungs and two through his head, James Whalen, a second-story man, sank lifeless in an alley off Gilbert Lane on the east side to-day shortly after noon. No arrests have been made. He had been released from the Tombs less than an hour before. A woman of the district, locally known as Mamie the Coke, evidently in a crazed condition, shot herself fatally through the left breast upon discovering the murdered man’s body. She died in the ambulance. She made no statement.’ ”

The frail little woman let the paper slip through her fingers, and sat very white and still.

McCollough reached for the paper with a hand that did not tremble. He read the item aloud with carefully correct enunciation. It was as though he were tipsily struggling to control his thick tongue.

He went out into the hall and put on his rubbers.

“ Why—are you going out?”

“ A matter of some moment, dear. In connection with—er—arising out of this Whalen matter. I must go—at once.”

Well, it was all over at last. Anyhow, he reflected as he sat hunched in the half-empty street-car, he had shielded the little woman at home from the incessant agony that he had somehow managed to endure. She had known nothing of the drab ugliness of the night courts where he had sometimes—not always—saved his child from sentence; nothing of the drear promises of reform that her half-drunken, drugged lips had blubbered.

And now he would see her decently laid at rest. Some far taint of blood had had its way with her poor body. Now she was at peace.

Yes, the little woman had been spared all this. And some day he must fashion the lie of a peaceful death in some far city. He knew a friend in Denver to whom he could send a draft of a telegram and letter, telling of death through some innocent cause. The letter would tell of useful and honorable work; tender, helpful labor among the slums, a gentle, Christian character evolved from out all the early mistakes. His heart was soothed as he visualized the picture of the little woman reading.

Very late the next morning Newell P. McCollough dressed for another day. There was a sad tranquillity in his face.

“ I feel that I should show in some little way that—ah, yes! A plain black tie would not be noticeable. Lawyers often wear black ties. There was one I wore for a time when brother Joe died over four years ago now. Suppose it is somewhere in these drawers.”

He fumbled in the drawers of the old-fashioned bureau.

“ Can’t seem to find it,” he muttered. Then he went over to the dresser where his wife always laid out for him a fresh collar and cuffs.

A plain black tie was carefully placed by the collar.

“ Well, well!” he mused abstractedly. “ Quite a coincidence. Strange that she should have laid out a black tie for me. I so seldom wear one.”

Ladyfingers

by Jackson Gregory

Author of "The Short Cut," "Wolf Breed," "The Fire Flower," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

ROBERT ASHE, better known to the San Francisco police as "Ladyfingers" because of his ability to rob burglar-proof safes, runs foul of Lieutenant Ambrose, a grafting policeman; Joe Le Brun, a boss gangster; and a mysterious "unknown," who has an equally unknown reason for wanting Ladyfingers jailed. Polly Le Brun, daughter of Joe Le Brun, is in love with Ashe, and because he does not reciprocate, she double-crosses him by asking him to get the famous Stetheril diamond for her, at the same time arranging to have Ambrose on the scene when, at a social function, Ladyfingers cleverly relieves the irritable Mrs. Rachel Stetheril of the diamond. In the scuffle a man is shot, and Ashe gets away.

CHAPTER VII.

DAMASCUS AMBROSE STEEL.

IT may be said that almost from the day when he had stolen his first unripe banana, Robert Ashe had planned for to-night. If the time ever came to him when his destiny dictated, "Run for it!" he would squander no precious moments either in indecision nor yet in dashing madly down a blind alley.

Run, in all literal truth, he did now, and like a frightened deer. So much was compulsory since Ambrose was breaking through the shrubbery after him, shooting as he came. But not heedlessly. A seasoned general in his own particular kind of campaigning, an essential part of his cool brain never lost thought of the one proper avenue of retreat.

Now, even as Polly's diamond was struck from his hand, he knew exactly what he would do. He was defeated in this engagement; but there was the comforting thought that—

He who fights and runs away
May live to fight another day.

And so Ashe ran.

To hit a running figure in an uncertain light is by no means so simple a thing in marksmanship as it might be. Ambrose's bullets went wild. To make matters worse for the ambitious lieutenant of police, Ambrose had lost his temper. Ashe vaulted a low fence, turned to his right without looking—he had looked as he came in—sped between two imposing concrete residences, came out into a street, turned again to his right, raced down a quiet block, turned another corner, passed through the back yards of three more of Oakland's ostentatious homes, through a lot where a house was building and through another garden.

Here a moment he stopped, resting. And while he rested he lighted a cigar. Then again he went on, now walking briskly, once more breathing normally.

He turned in at the front entrance of a veritable palace in glistening cement and rang the door-bell. To the maid, who appeared almost immediately, he said quietly:

"A crime has been committed. At the

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for April 21.

Sinclair Sutcliffe's. An attempt to rob Mrs. Rachel Stetheril. May I use your telephone?"

And for the maid's edification he threw back the lapel of his coat showing the bright nickel star of a detective's authority.

The maid, duly impressed and concerned, let him in and was hurrying down the great hallway with word to her mistress when she was met by a tall, slender girl not over twenty who turned startled, wondering eyes from servant to intruder.

"Oh, Miss Daly!" cried the maid. "There's been a crime at Mrs. Sinclair Sutcliffe's. A thief—"

"That will do," said Miss Daly briefly.

She came on to where Ashe was standing. He met her smilingly, his glance taking admiring stock of her graceful carriage and bright, interested eyes. Her hair was arranged most wonderfully, her gown was exquisite, her arms and throat were milk white.

Taking no pains to conceal the urgency of his visit he found time, none the less, to make the distinct impression that a man might be a detective and yet a gentleman with a charming personality, thoroughly appreciative of the feminine perfection with which he was confronted.

He outlined his errand. He saw that her imagination was touched, that a quick flush of excitement came into her cheeks and that her eyes brightened. He guessed that his fate was good to him and that he would have small trouble making his "bluff" good. He called San Francisco, got the chief of police upon the line and said swiftly.

"Lieutenant Ambrose speaking." He smiled as he said it, straight into a pair of wide, brown eyes which smiled back at him. "In Piedmont. Ladyfingers tried to put one over at the Sinclair-Sutcliffe affair, just as I thought he would. Mrs. Rachel Stetheril's diamond, you know."

"Oh!" gasped the girl at his side.

"No," ran on Ashe, "he's got clean away. But I'll nab him before morning.

Will you call up the Oakland chief and have him ready to loan me a couple of men? Tell him I'll be at Fourteenth and Broadway just as soon as I can get a taxi."

And leaving a very deeply surprised chief of police staring at his telephone in San Francisco, Ashe clicked up the receiver.

"I am very sorry I was obliged to trouble you," he apologized. "But, as you see, the case is urgent. You can't understand, perhaps, just how much success or failure will mean to me to-night. And now," the telephone book in his hands, "may I call another number? If I can beat the street cars down-town—get a taxi, you know."

"Wait!" The thing he had hoped for came quite as he had expected it. "Mrs. Hampton's car is in the garage. I'll have George drive you down."

She was tremendously interested, Ashe noted. Her hands were tight clasped, she was breathing quickly. While the maid ran eagerly in quest of George, the chauffeur, the girl herself opened the front door for Ashe.

"You can't understand," she cried with high animation, "just what your success or failure will mean to me! The thief got away with the diamond, you said?"

"Why, I believe not," he told her. "It was knocked from his hand, falling into the grass—"

"Good!" She clapped her hands. "You see," she explained, "I rather count some day upon the Stetheril diamond being mine!"

"Yours!" He looked his amazement.

"Yes, Rachel Stetheril is a grandaunt of mine. She is staying here to-night. I'm her nearest of kin, I believe. I should have been with her when the thing happened only—" She lifted her white shoulders and her black brows in a way prettily reminiscent of the French, somehow giving him the impression that while the Sinclair Sutcliffes were very nice sort of people, still—

She and Ashe stepped outside. Already

a man was unlocking the double doors of the garage in the rear of the gardens. This Ashe saw with satisfaction. But another sight, almost at the same instant, checked the words upon his lips and shot his heart up into his throat. Just turning in from the sidewalk, not fifty feet from him, were a man and a woman, the man noteworthy for the muffler drawn up about his throat, the woman none other than Mrs. Rachel Stetheril.

"Here she is now!" cried the girl.

"You'll explain how urgent the matter is?" Already the boy had run down the stairs. "That I couldn't stop? May I call to thank you to-morrow?"

He ran through the garden, about the corner of the house and to the garage. And as he went he heard a man running after him.

George had the car out, the motor drumming eagerly. The uniformed maid, her hands clasped, was trembling with the excitement of the chase. Ashe leaped into the tonneau, crying sharply.

"Cut her loose."

"Hold on, George!" The voice, sharper than Ashe's, came from the man in the muffler. "There's a mistake here."

"There's no mistake," snapped Ashe, recognizing clearly enough the danger of delay. "A crime has been committed and the criminal will make a clean getaway if we stand here all night."

Desperately he played his one card, his eyes keenly watchful to see if it turned out a high trump or a joker which had crept into his deck; he threw back his coat so that both men might see the nicked emblem.

"I am—"

"Oh, I know who you are," came the quick rejoinder. "And the thief won't get away at all! The police know right where to lay their hands on him. I—I want to talk with you. Damn it!" as the maid came closer to listen and George turned half around to stare in a puzzled fashion. "Drive around the block."

He jumped in, slammed the door after him, and George turned the big car out

toward the street. Ashe, no less puzzled than George, but believing himself ready for whatever might come kept his muscles on the alert, his mind wide awake.

Even as the car leaped forward the man at Ashe's elbow began to speak hurriedly, his voice too low for George to hear.

"Do as I say," he said bluntly, "and do it blind-fold. Or I'll hand you over to Lieutenant Ambrose. Which is it?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Ashe coolly, his eyes at once upon the face thrust close up to his and on some new avenue of escape.

"I'm Justin Haddon," said the other abruptly. "Remember the name. Justin Haddon. Lawyer. Retained by Rachel Stetheril. You are Robert Ashe, known as Ladyfingers. You've got to have a new name if you do as I tell you. Since you are a thief I'll name you Steele. You can choose your own given name."

"Thanks," returned Ashe coolly. "I'll choose Damascus. Damascus Steele always did sound well to me. And, when we're great friends, you can call me Dam Steele for short!"

"While we've never met until this afternoon," went on Haddon swiftly, "you are my new secretary. A common friend—Charlie Brewer of Sacramento—gave you a letter to me."

"It happens," said Ashe, mystified, but sensing a chance for safety in obliging Haddon, "that I've told the young lady back there that my name was Ambrose and that I'm on the force in the city."

"Hell!" muttered Haddon. For a little while the machine raced on, then, suddenly, he straightened up.

"You are a friend of the chief in San Francisco," he said. "In an amateurish way you are interested in crime. He fixed you up with a badge and let you freelance on this case. He had a tip that something was going to happen. But the Ambrose part—"

"Ambrose Steele," grinned Ashe. "If you like, Dam Ambrose Steele."

"All right," said Haddon. "George, drive back to the house."

"Drive slowly, George," added Ashe. "Now, Haddon," he went on, seeing that he would have little time for coming to a conclusion and never losing sight of the importance of choosing the right path, "hadn't you better explain a little?"

"Not a bit," said Haddon. "You do what I tell you to do and I'll see you through. Balk, and, by God, I'll send you to the penitentiary. Which is it?"

For a moment Ashe was silent, thinking swiftly. He saw Haddon's jaw, hard set, Haddon's mouth grip-lipped. He would have given a great deal for a look into Haddon's hidden eyes.

The car stopped in front of the house. Rachel Stetheril and the girl had evidently gone indoors. There was no one here but Haddon and George.

"I think," said Ashe in that clear, cool young voice of his, "that as names go, Damascus Ambrose Steele is hard to beat."

And slipping his arm through that of Mr. Justin Haddon he walked blithely with his new employer to the door beyond which was the woman he had sought to rob for the sake of Polly Le Brun.

"But the diamond!" a girl's voice was saying as the maid opened the door.

And in the sharp, acid voice of that sharp, acid woman, Rachel Stetheril, came the words:

"Damn the diamond! I'm sick of hearing of it. And I'm sick of those fool Sutcliffes. Make me some tea and find out when the next train leaves. I'm going home."

"Surely not to-night, Aunt Rachel!"

"To-night," snapped Aunt Rachel. "Oakland makes me sick. And you're going with me. You've got more sense than I thought you had. When did you have gumption enough to quarrel with that she-dog of a Sutcliffe woman?"

Then it was that Ashe and Haddon entered.

"Mrs. Stetheril," said Haddon, his manner suddenly so deferential as to be on the verge of servility, "may I introduce Mr. Ambrose Steele? My new sec-

retary whom I am taking back to Lockworth when we go. Miss Daly, Mr. Steele."

"But," gasped Evelyn. "I thought—"

Ashe, having bowed, laughed lightly.

"That I was a professional detective? God forbid! A sort of a free lance, an amateur, just for a night, you know—"

"But you have given up?" cried Evelyn. "And the thief who has aunty's diamond—"

"Didn't I say damn the diamond!" snapped Rachel Stetheril. And then, turning her bright old eyes upon Ashe, eyes which had the wisdom of a century in them and the hardness of eternity, "Come here. I said, come here, sir!"

Ashe, still smiling, obeyed. As he came quite close Mrs. Stetheril suddenly thrust forward her head, her eyes now not six inches from his own. And, although his heart was sinking, although he knew that he had not over one chance in the two that she should not recognize the man who had sought to rob her, he continued to smile.

"Humph!" said the old woman. "Evelyn, go make my tea. Haddon, we take the next train home. Yes, me and you and Evelyn and Steele and any more live stock you want. What the devil do you want with a secretary, anyhow? Are you getting so rich off of me that you can afford a hired man to do your work?"

"Mrs. Stetheril," began Haddon with dignity, "surely you—"

"Oh, shut up!" cried the old woman. "For God's sake, shut up!"

Evelyn, flashing a quick look at Ashe, went to prepare Rachel Stetheril's tea.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GREAT ADVENTURE (?)

ROBERT ASHE sat in the sun, upon the top rail of a high fence and watched a grunting sow suckling her incredibly large litter of amazingly hungry pigs.

"I have dreamed a dream and the

dream has come true!" he mused within himself, conscious of a vast satisfaction.

He had a clean wisp of fresh, fragrant straw between his teeth, the rolling sweep of a green-carpeted valley before his eyes, the bursting springtime in his heart, a vision in his soul and the great round world under his feet.

In his pocket, since there had been neither time nor opportunity for a visit to the Mission Street pier, were a few small silver coins. He drew them forth, smiled at them and tossed them down to the sow and pigs. The sow sniffed at them and lay back grunting lazily; the pigs were not to be diverted from their breakfasting by the inconsequential glitter. Ashe laughed.

If in all of Lockworth Valley, a valley of contented souls, there was this morning a happier individual than Robert Ashe, then surely must that radiant person be in hiding with his consuming joy under some great hay stack. For not yet had the sun shone upon him.

Last night there had been a moment when the boy had been lifted high upon the mounting wave of his own destiny, when it lay in the future whether he would be hurled downward into a black maelstrom, chaotic and menacing or laid lightly upon the sun-kissed beach of a fairy island.

But now he could forget that moment so supremely tense. Now he could look across the miles of the valley to the calm, big boled oaks gathered like a parliament of kings upon the foothills; now he could breathe an air which seemed to draw its subtle fragrance from blue sky, golden sun and the tender green of the meadow lands and which put a new ecstasy into his soul.

Now almost he felt that he could kneel like some old pagan "suckled in a creed outworn" and pour out his gushing thanks that he had been led into a vale of the earthly paradise. Now he could love life like a sweetheart; now could he adore the earth itself as though she were a woman.

For now she was one who, courted long, drew her veil aside and smiled at him. Tenderness was in her look and promise and surrender; the fragrance of her intoxicated his soul; her arms were about him; yonder, where the fields swelled gently, were her warm breasts seeming actually to stir under the soft green of her robe.

Last night his brain had been seething with suspicions, pricked by innumerable questions demanding their answers.

How had it chanced that Ambrose had been on hand at the Sutcliffe's? Had the thing been that frame-up which Polly had mentioned? Was Polly herself at last a traitor to his interests? Why had Justin Haddon, Mrs. Stetheril's lawyer, shielded him?

These were but a few of the questions which suggested so many others. To-day they were all unanswered. Just now they did not seem to matter. He was like a schoolboy who, knowing that he should be in his classroom struggling with an examination in improper fractions, goes racing away with his dog across the fields, concerned utterly with ground squirrels, cottontails and an ultimate swimming hole.

From his perch upon the enclosure fence Ashe surveyed what was to be seen of the valley somewhat with the eye of a proprietor. He noted the general checker-board design and found that it was saved from geometrical hideousness by the budding branches of the fruit trees themselves which boisterously had defied the pruning knife's command to symmetry, and by the stirring fields of wheat and barley intersected joyously and illogically by the springtime rivulets.

Lockworth Creek itself, the sovereign to which these little fellows paid tribute, could be seen from here demanding further tribute of three bridges across the long lane between the fertile fields which was the county road running straight to Lockworth Town.

The town, three or four miles away, cresting a broad-based, flat-topped hill,

its white walls and clambering rose vines granted a sweet daintiness by the distance, looked the fairy capital of the happy valley. Even the track of the narrow-gage railway connecting the village with the main line junction, hidden, happily, by the blue wall of mountains to the west, fitted not inharmoniously into the placidity of the landscape, looking rather toy rails than the crude iron path of material traffic.

The black column of smoke standing aloft and mightily staining the blue of the sky might be—as it was in fact—a signal that the Stetheril mills were grinding; Ashe chose to look upon it as a vast, billowing plume floating bannerwise over the valley.

“It’s all mine; it belongs to me!”

So he chose to muse, though he knew well enough to whom it belonged. The narrow-gage railroad belonged to Rachel Stetheril; the mills under the smoke plume were Rachel Stetheril’s; the great, verandaed, three-storied, white-columned house, set like a palace in its ten acres of lawn and garden a mile to the eastward of the village, was Rachel Stetheril’s; the five hundred acres of vineyard yonder, the thousands of acres there which now looked like velvety lawns, but which as the months passed would rustle in russet, heavy with bearded heads of ripe grain—these were Rachel Stetheril’s.

The man teaming over yonder, now cracking his long whip lazily over the long, lazy ears of his mules, the woman about to meet him, driving her fat mare in the swinging shafts of an ancient top-buggy—were they no less Rachel Stetheril’s since she could make or break them, at her will and in an instant?

But this morning there could exist in the heart of Rachel Stetheril no securer sense of ownership of the wide fields, the big barns and little cottages, the grazing stock and growing green things than was to be found in the breast of Robert Ashe, known erstwhile as Ladyfingers, the San Francisco thief, set, as by magic, in the place where he most wished to be.

The mood of the valley made of his mood something rarely sympathetic. He was half inclined to feel sorry for such as Richard Ambrose and Joe Le Brun. Whether or not Polly had “double-crossed” him, he was unqualifiedly sorry for her, pitied her in the poor little wretched life wherein from barren grapes she sought to tread out a little of life’s wine of joy. What chance had she ever had since her mother bore her daughter to Joe Le Brun, sister to San Francisco’s cobbles!

But of these he thought only dimly.

Justin Haddon—Ashe had at last seen his eyes, the eyes of a nervous man who, perhaps, was attempting something too big for him, something he had better left alone—was, the boy believed, something of a rascal. But rascals were, according to his way of thinking, all right in their place, and he was prepared to like Haddon.

He was even ready—and the thought was at the root of the smile which he turned upon the world at large—to like Rachel Stetheril.

She was, to be sure, an old savage, she barked at people rather than spoke humanly; when displeased she glared evilly like an old witch, poison-eyed; she cursed wickedly when she was irritated, which she was, so far as Ashe could judge, all the time; she would have slapped a porter’s face last night had he not been precipitate in the mode of his departure; she had dubbed her grandniece a chit of a fool, Haddon a damned dunce, Ashe himself a booby, all in one venomous gasp last night when she misplaced her tall umbrella, and no one found it quickly enough to suit her. And yet, “I’ll bet she’s not half as bad as her growl!” mused Ashe.

And her grandniece, Evelyn Daly?

Ashe himself had said to Polly Le Brun, “soon or late the great adventure comes to all men.” And he had said further, in the same strain, “she will be a great lady; one of my mother’s sort of people; of my own true class.”

Now that his world was speeding

through a new orbit, impelled lustily by some agent of white magic, was the realization of another dream to be granted the favored adventurer? Was Evelyn the she of his prophecy?

The girl was high bred. That she showed in the fine delicacy of her features, in the shapely hands and feet, in the swift, cool regard of her long-lashed eyes, in the carriage of her head, the poise of her slender body. Cultured she was and, what is more, refined. And Ashe she accepted as one of her own station, treated as one of her own rank.

That, while the pleasure to him arising from it subtly defied analysis, flattered him. Was not this girl of the upper class, born to a life which had been the boy's birthright but which he had never known intimately save in his dreamings, destined to be the true lady of his romance? Did she not embody all of these things that had been wanting from the life of a San Francisco thief? For is it not at once logic and nature for one to yearn for that which has always been beyond his possession?

What Ashe knew of the way of a gentleman, that rare, natural thing with so many cheap imitations, came to him in subconsciously remembered precepts from his mother, in fragmentary scraps from the sad talk of a broken Englishman, and, most of all, from his reading chivalric tales.

The bow with which he bent over Evelyn's hand upon telling her good night was a story-book bow such as had not been seen in the region of San Francisco Bay for a long, practical generation. The little phrases which came so naturally to his smiling lips might have been uttered in an earlier incarnation at the court of King Arthur. His deportment toward Rachel Stetheril was quite that of a young knight, gay in his newly-won golden spurs, rising from his knees before a great queen.

And, certain it is, that if a shrewd pair of old eyes stared at him wickedly, another pair of eyes, scarcely less intent, followed him brightly. Justin Haddon,

whose attitude toward Evelyn was very much that of an accepted suitor, appeared suddenly a trifle stiff in his manner and looked displeased.

Whether or not he had already begun his great adventure, Ashe did not know; he did know that he was quite prepared to fall in love. He did know that the year was at the spring and the day at the morning; that most unquestionably the distant hillsides were dew-pearled; that there could be no doubt but that that joyous thing floating above the fields was a lark, a meadow lark, to be sure, but sprinkling its morning song in liquid notes, full-throatedly; that God must be in his heaven, since certain all was right with the world down here.

CHAPTER IX.

BEESON VERSUS WARNER.

OLD MAN BEESON, the most hoary of all the many retainers in the service of Rachel Stetheril, nowadays did little more than talk and smoke his corncob pipe and draw his monthly pay.

More than anything else did he love to sit at the door of his cabin down in the meadow—where it was discreetly hidden by the creek's willows from the big house, but where it stood forth boldly to the winding country road—and talk.

He had long ago come to that point where a man, though he sit in the sun of to-day, does his living under the stars of yesterday. He had no concern with present politics, weather, or crops. He told you either of the election of Garfield, the rains of sixty-four, or the corn that used to grow right out yonder where you see that pesky stuff. And he told you most eagerly—for here was a topic upon which old man Beeson had no one left to gainsay him, no printed statistics to argue against him—of the girlhood of Rachel Stetheril.

Old man Beeson never wore a hat and never lost his hair. But his hair grew

white; his eyes weren't much use to him after late afternoon; his ears brought him word of the great world in a muffled undertone; his mind wandered.

Still, he told a circumstantial tale—or, rather, the story told itself, grown automatic through countless repetitions, sounding faint in his own ears.

"Close to eighty year, 'is she? Pooh! What's that? Ain't I close on to a hunderd? Why, I remember—"

Eagerly then, his voice trembling a little just as his uplifted hand shook, he talked swiftly until he had made sure that he had his listener "hooked." Then he staged his scenes with deliberate elaborateness, arranged his climaxes, builded his mysteries, lingered over his dramatic pauses.

For every year which life added to his score it would seem that old man Beeson went a year further back into the life that had been. Now had he reached that year 1837, when an English merchant named George Stetheril came first with three ships, like Columbus to the New World. But George Stetheril came into California, and for the most part stayed there, becoming a part of the country, marrying the daughter of a stately old Spaniard, building the basement and first story of the Stetheril wealth. With him had come a boy named Willie Beeson.

"Grand folks they was in England, too," old man Beeson had come to tell, although there were those who could remember that some twenty years ago he had not gone so far as this in his epic; indeed, old man Warner, who claimed to be as old as Beeson himself, and who upon all possible opportunities called his rival an old fool, maintained that George Stetheril had been the son of a poor and unimportant country squire.

"Grand folks," Beeson would repeat, wagging his head. "Such as didn't turn a hair at a quiet game of cribbage with a dook nor yet a mug of ale with a earl. Yes, sir; when George Stetheril was a man gone thirty and I was an upstandin'

lad of ten, we come acrost the ocean, and here we be ever since in Californy—George until he died, me until this very minute."

Old man Warner had been in the valley for forty years. Upon any matter which had occurred during that time in the Stetheril annals he served as an eager critic of old man Beeson's tale. But upon happenings antedating his coming to Lockworth he was, perforce, nervously and suspiciously tongue-tied. And here old man Beeson went as far as he liked.

If you took Beeson's word for it—and it was either be satisfied with that or construct an entirely imaginary history for yourself, since no man ever came into the valley sufficiently mad to interrogate the only other person qualified to speak upon it—Rachel Stetheril once upon a time had been a girl.

The thing sounded incredible; it is to be doubted if old man Warner ever gave credence to it; but none the less stoutly did old man Beeson maintain it as a sort of axiomatic truth upon which the whole fabric of his legend stood.

She had been a pretty girl, at that; he flung the statement at a listener defiantly, challenging him to carry *that* to old man Warner for refutation! Moreover, she had been gay-hearted and full of vivacity, mischief, and tenderness, all mixed up. Yes, sir!

"Oh, yes," old man Beeson would invariably add after this, one of his dramatic pauses, "that was a right smart time ago. I do believe," he would chuckle evilly, "it was some time before Abe Warner ever come to Lockworth. Might have been before he was born. Dunno."

He'd admit thoughtfully that even in her glad girlhood Rachel Stetheril had been stubborn; also that, when things didn't go just to suit her, she could display the hot temper of a yellow-jacket. Time was that he'd make the statement, cautiously dropping his voice, looking around to see that no new listener had come up.

Now he cried it out triumphantly in his thin old voice; dad burn it, he didn't care who heard it. And indeed, secure in his garrulous old age, old man Beeson had perhaps less fear of Rachel Stetheril than had any one else in the valley.

She had had one sister. Always, until the last couple of years, Beeson had spoken familiarly of this other, calling her Alice. It was noted here of late that while he still told of Rachel's sister, he was satisfied in terming her the other Stetheril girl.

Old man Warner seized upon the fact and went clacking up and down Lockworth with it, giggling like a schoolgirl, averring that "the doddering old fool had forgot what her name was and, most likely, would be calling her Mary next time." The sister, a little younger than Rachel, had not had Rachel's lasting qualities. Old man Beeson was a trifle ashamed of her; she had died when only sixty-seven.

For Beeson's purposes Alice Stetheril had no intrinsic importance on earth. But Evelyn Daly had to be accounted for. Evelyn Daly was known to be the heiress to the many millions that had rolled up in the Stetheril name; and Evelyn was the great-granddaughter of Alice, hence the great-grandniece of Rachel herself. This was clear in old man Beeson's mind because of oft-repeated insistence upon it, even when the mind itself was no longer clear.

Here he would pause again, suck his pipe, scratch his ear, and get his "second wind." For all this was but the prologue to his tale. And then the tale itself, the tale whose telling drove old man Warner into purple, vein-swelling rage.

For many a time had some one of the newcomers into the valley asked, "Is that so, Mr. Warner?" and he could only snap back, "Dunno; I wasn't here then. But most likely it's a lie, seeing who said it!" And of late it was a rare joy to be able to add: "Why, the fuddled old fool don't even rec'lect the names of the people he's trying to tell about!"

Anyway, Beeson was still in his own exclusive demesne. Rachel Stetheril had married a man of whom Beeson spoke with open contempt; the fellow had died when on the wrong side, that is the under side, of forty. It was because she had been ashamed of him, rather than for any of the numerous reasons set forward by rumor, that Rachel Stetheril had resumed her own maiden name after his death. Beeson no longer showed his teeth upon making this point, for obvious reasons; but make it he still continued to do with emphasis.

There had been a child, a daughter, and Rachel had been mad about her. But she had grown up and married a cigarmaker's son, when she might have had a banker's, and in many other ways showed the whole countryside the sort she was. She spent all that her mother gave her, which as time went by was less and less. Maybe old man Warner could remember her?

"A blue-eyed thing," said old man Beeson.

"Brown-eyed," said old man Warner.

"A little thing, and as pretty as a picture," said old man Beeson. "Just like her mother was sixty year ago. Plump, you know. Cozy."

"Tall, slim thing," said old man Warner. "Not much to look at, but good-hearted."

"Fell in love with a man named Ellis, a good-for-nothing son of a cigarmaker, that couldn't support her after she married him; just as Rachel Stetheril had warned her—"

"Was forced into a marriage with a man she hated, the son of old Ellis, a sort of tobacco-king, that old she-devil of a Stetheril woman nagging at her until the poor girl give in—"

"And all these years," said old man Beeson, "things went bad for Rachel Stetheril, and she got stubborn and stubborn and sharper and sharper. When the daughter that she loved up and left her with that fool husband of hers; and when her husband died, and she

wouldn't come back unless Rachel Stetheril begged her to, which, being Rachel Stetheril, she wouldn't do; and when *she* died, not even leaving a girl baby after her to be a granddaughter in the Big House, Rachel Stetheril got bitterer and bitterer, and meaner and meaner, and took it all out upon everybody that come across her path.

"And now there's that Evelyn Daly—she's the grandniece of Rachel Stetheril's sister—and *she'll* up and marry the wrong fellow; and *she'll* up and die; and then there won't be a thing left of the proud old Stetheril family but Rachel Stetheril and me."

And, here of late, at the end of his own tale, a suspicious shining wetness came into old man Beeson's eyes.

So much of Rachel Stetheril did Robert Ashe in due time come to know when once he stopped at old man Beeson's cabin. He wondered, even then, whom Evelyn Daly would some day marry.

CHAPTER X.

ROSES AND ROMANCE.

AS was her custom, without reference to the season of the year and whether clocks ticked or stopped, Rachel Stetheril rose at a quarter of six in the morning. At six exactly she was unfolding her napkin over her little table in the breakfast-room. At that identical moment a very obviously nervous girl—her name during the years had been at one time Maggie, at another Sara, at another Em'ly, but always she was a nervous girl!—was placing a hot cup of coffee at Rachel Stetheril's place and watching her mistress anxiously for a sign whether she was to say "Good morning!" or to keep her mouth shut.

At this same magic hour of six a very nervous cook—no matter what her name, she was always as nervous as the serving maid—was standing quite near the door from kitchen to breakfast-room, listening

for what might be the first sounds to come to her.

Whenever she discharged a cook, and this was a thing she had done many a time, Rachel Stetheril had done it over her breakfast. Upon days that she was particularly, in the sense of unusually, sour-tempered, Rachel Stetheril's snapishness seemed a thing that had swelled in the night and had, at six o'clock, blossomed into full-blown flower.

As was her custom, Rachel Stetheril was out of the house at fifteen minutes after six. In the wide path leading to the wide front doors she was met by Huxter, the head gardener. Huxter answered any questions she might choose to put to him, and if the time seemed propitious—that is, if upon having looked in at the kitchen window he had already seen the serving maid nod to the cook that it was "all right,"—he offered certain remarks of his own about the grounds and what he should to-day require of the men under him.

Huxter's daily audience with Rachel Stetheril lasted anywhere from five seconds to three minutes, and from it he took unto himself great glory and a very remarkable swagger.

Thereafter his mistress proceeded with quick, jerky little steps down the broad path, leaning a little more heavily upon her tall, black stick. In the dull-black, fashionless dress she wore she looked like nothing more in the world than a little beetle whose way had led through a dusty road.

Then there was young Beeson tugging hard at the bits of a span of devil-hearted grays, black Joe, of her own importation, to doff his hat, grin widely take her elbow and help her to a seat, and away they went, grays, young Beeson, Joe, and Rachel Stetheril, upon an endless tour of inspection.

As was the custom of another person in whose veins was the Stetheril blood, equally disdainful of weather and clocks, Evelyn awoke at some indefinite time between nine and eleven. She yawned

prettily after the manner of a healthy young animal, stretched luxuriously, and dozed again. Thereafter in due time she rose, arranged herself daintily in warm slippers, "boodie" cap, and flowered kimono.

In a house like this, where there were always bells to ring and servants to come hastening at the first tinkle, she rang. But not until she had seen in a glass just how much good her sleep had done her. This morning her eyes were very bright, her coloring a hint of a tint more than perfect.

She rang. A rosy-cheeked maid, whose position was enviable ordinarily in the Big House, but who had her work cut out for her during the visits of Evelyn Daly, came and attended the many wants of the city girl.

"My hair, Browdy," said Miss Evelyn.

Browdy—every one else on earth who knew her called her Jennie, but for all that her father's name was Browdy, and she was a servant, and in the sort of literature which Evelyn affected she would have been known as Browdy in spite of her fresh-cheeked prettiness and amazing dimples—Browdy, then, combed Miss Daly's hair, while Miss Daly herself gave her undivided attention to the diurnal needs of her pink nails.

"That will do, Browdy," said Miss Evelyn. "I'll arrange it myself. My pearl-gray slippers this morning."

Browdy got the slippers, and, with one in each plump little hand and something akin to amusement in her wide, blue eyes, stood just far enough to the side and behind her mistress to be out of danger of being seen in the mirror, and watched.

Slowly, as the shining hair was caught up and wound, twisted into a gleaming coil and transfixed with a pin here, brought down and empaled there, made finally into the latest thing in morning coiffures, the look of amusement went out of Browdy's bright eyes, and into them entered interest and approval. There would be a dance in Lockworth in the

course of a week or so, and Browdy would be there, and—there were compensations, after all, in being lady's maid to such as Evelyn Daly.

Evelyn turned unexpectedly, and Browdy, flushing, came forward swiftly, offering the slippers.

"You look very pretty, Miss Evelyn," she said. "Awful pretty."

"The gray gown, Browdy—the one I told you to be careful of last night."

Browdy got it—also stockings, lingerie, ribbons, pins, everything needed and asked for.

Evelyn, dressed, examined herself with frank interest. A caressing hand came away from her hair, administered a touch of powder to the tip of her nose, went back to her hair.

"I need a flower," she said. "Browdy, are there any roses in bloom now? Big ones? White, or pink?"

Browdy gasped and widened her eyes.

"I forgot!" she exclaimed, and, with the whisk of skirt and the slam of a door, was gone.

Evelyn sighed.

As quickly as her plump little feet could carry her down a long flight of winding stairs, along a longer hallway, back through the hallway, and again up the stairs, Browdy made her flying trip.

"I found 'em the first thing this morning," she explained breathlessly. "On the table in the hall, under the window."

They were a great bunch of white roses, some full blown, some mere dainty buds, all fresh and fragrant and caught together by a piece of twine. From the twine fluttered a bit of paper.

Browdy's bright eyes fairly sparkled now; so, in truth, did Evelyn's. From maid's hands the flowers went quickly to mistress's. Upon the paper was the type-written legend:

For Miss Evelyn Daly.

Now, suddenly, surely Evelyn's eyes were brighter than Jennie Browdy's, her cheeks pinker. For a moment she held the fragrant roses against her cheek.

Then, with deft fingers selecting the queen of the white galaxy of superb flowers, she arranged it in her hair.

"That will be all, Browdy."

With her own hands she placed the other flowers in water.

Browdy turned to depart, having already tidied the room. Evelyn, the typewritten bit of paper in her hand, called after the girl softly.

"Aunt Rachel has gone out?" she wanted to know.

"Oh, yes, miss—hours ago."

"And—has any one called this morning?"

Browdy shook her curly head.

"Mr. Haddon hasn't—"

"Oh, yes, miss," cried Browdy. "I didn't think about him. He stops in every morning, you know, on his way into Lockworth."

"He didn't stop? And—there wasn't any one with him?"

"There was, though," cried Browdy. "A young man, just a boy to look at." She blushed and dropped her eyes. Ashe had smiled at her this morning and had lifted his hat to her in a way which little Jennie Browdy had not known before to be possible. "Cook says he's Mr. Haddon's new secretary."

"Did he— That's all, Browdy."

Browdy went, and Evelyn turned back to the roses. The little slip of paper came in for a most curious and interested study. The flowers spelled romance; the note, typewritten and unsigned, hinted at mystery. A little ecstatic thrill was the result of their combined appeal to the romantic soul of Miss Evelyn Daly.

"He's like a prince in a fairy tale!" she whispered.

And there never lived the man, perhaps not even the woman, who could speak in such terms of Attorney Justin Haddon, the betrothed of the heiress to the Stetheril millions.

Then Evelyn went down to breakfast. She was conscious of a satisfying, vastly pleasurable exhilaration this morning. In all things essentially a city girl, she was

glad to be in the country. In town she had a maid only when she could borrow one at the home where she chanced to be a guest.

Other things, scarcely less desirable, she could have only in proportion with the latest check which her Aunt Rachel had happened to send her.

In some matters Rachel Stetheril was extremely methodical; in others as markedly erratic. When there came a letter from the Lockworth bank, Evelyn never opened it but that her fingers shook and her heart skipped beats.

She might unfold a check for five hundred dollars; the paper might, on the other hand, read, "Pay to the order of Evelyn Daly twenty-five dollars," the wretched paucity made emphatic by the "and no cents" which Evelyn detested on general principles.

But here there was a maid; here Evelyn might ring for what other servants she liked, and they would come promptly; here she might at a moment's notice have saddle-horse, carriage, or automobiles; the conveyance she chose would carry her like a story-book princess into Lockworth, where people nudged each other and pointed her out, and there, whatever the stores held, she might have by casually mentioning her aunt's name.

And always the baggageman handling Evelyn's trunks in the little town knew that they came from the city light and went back heavy. What he did not know, being a mere man, was that the material of the finest gowns which the young lady wore in San Francisco had been specially imported from that city, passed over a counter at Lockworth, duly charged to the account of Rachel Stetheril, packed carefully away, subsequently journeying back whence it had come, there to be made up into creations altogether befitting the Stetheril heiress.

In the warm glow of satisfaction this morning experienced by Miss Daly all of these matters and kindred had perhaps their influence mingled with that of a

mysterious present. As in the case of Bobbie Ashe, she could feel that the day was still at the morn, the morning at eleven, which was every bit as good as seven, even to the matter of rime, and that all was as it should be in the world.

"It couldn't have been Justin," she mused over her coffee. "He wouldn't have thought; if he had, he would have shattered the joy of the thing by writing in big letters, 'Yours Faithfully, Justin Haddon.' No; it wasn't Justin!"

She had quite a happy, sociable time over her breakfast. True, there was no one with her in the little sun-flooded room but the serving maid, and in her preoccupation Evelyn had not observed in what manner and through what agent her food came before her. But none the less she was in the society of one who understood her, one who sympathized with her, one who made allowances for her shortcomings and magically changed them into virtues; in sort she was upon terms of lively intimacy with that most charming person, Miss Evelyn Daly, heiress, *et cetera*.

The girl in the neat white apron and cap asked:

"Soft-boiled eggs this morning, Miss Daly?"

And Evelyn, not to be interrupted in her soul talk with the heiress, said to the latter:

"He *is* mysterious! There is mystery in his eyes—and poetry and romance! He *is* like a prince in a fairy tale! And he is a friend of the chief of police; he is an amateur detective. He dabbles in crime as other men play with politics!"

The thought was delightful, and from it was born a delicious little shudder which caused the attendant Jane to close the door for fear of a draft.

On her way down through the long, spacious hallway Evelyn peeped in at the open door of Rachel Stetheril's office. Here a typewriter was clicking like mad under the fingers of Adrian Graham, the old woman's latest private secretary.

Evelyn saw that here there had been

no change since her last visit, wrinkled her nose at Graham's bent back, and passed on. The young man, with his straight straw-colored hair, bleak-looking eyes, and frost-bitten face, had no place in the errant fancies of Evelyn Daly.

"I wonder," she asked herself as she came into the great, dim music-room, where her gray slippers sank deep into rich rugs, and where much stately furniture forgot its dignity and winked at her with the stolen light from the edges of drawn shades, "if he has ever *lived* any of the life which he has seen through a detective's eyes? If he himself has a past with mysteries in it?"

Again the little thrill, the delicious shudder at the thing created of her own vivid imaginings.

"I wonder," she went on, "if I really do love Justin? Or—"

She laughed softly to herself, still richly content with the exclusive company of an exclusive heiress, and going to the piano, sent the rollicking strains of a piece of glad music into the remotest corner of the big house. In the midst of her playing she stopped abruptly to rearrange the rose in her hair.

She had discovered, across the dim room, her own face in a mirror, looking, so she told the heiress, like a dream girl from another fairy story, or from the same one! What other matters came into her mind she didn't confess even to her sympathetic confidant; but as she got up from the piano, the tender tint in her cheeks had deepened. And she shook a grave finger at the fairy-dream girl as she went, quite as though in warning.

She was cuddled up nicely in a monster lounging-chair upon the porch sunning herself, her face protected by the drooping brim of a wide Panama, a late novel hastily absorbed as far as page ninety, when there came to her the sound of wheels and hoofs upon the gravel of the driveway.

Magically the book disappeared. To be sure, Rachel Stetheril would know nothing either of the title or the author,

but the numerous full-page illustrations were most startlingly interesting! Evelyn turned a laughing, sunny face up toward the frowning, wintry one bent over a crooked stick.

"For all things in the world, she *does* look just like a black witch!" said Evelyn to the heiress. "Good morning, aunty," said Evelyn to Rachel Stetheril. "I've had the most delightful morning!"

CHAPTER XI.

CHANGING MASTERS.

RACHEL STETHERIL had come up the flight of stone steps from the garden with a sprightly alacrity which at once fascinated and amazed her great-grandniece. For while the old woman seemed to look ten years older for each year that passed, until she was now the visible personification of decrepit old age, hollow-eyed, hollow-cheeked, with a witch's nose and chin drawing ever closer each other as the mouth receded—while she looked all this if you managed to catch her an instant in repose, which was an achievement you might boast of, in action she seemed younger this morning than she had been ten years ago.

The brightness of her eyes bespoke the quickness of her mind; the sharpness of her tongue was ample sign of the nimbleness of her temper; the birdlike alertness in the carriage of her head, the grim set of her long fingers about her stick, the quick step, all bespoke the woman's character.

Now she hobbled down the porch until she bent over Evelyn's chair, her hard, wise old eyes gimleting after whatever the girl might hold secretly in her mind, and actually making Evelyn wonder if they saw the naughty latest thing in books under the thick cushions.

"You're a pretty thing," snapped the old woman.

"Thank you, aunty," said Evelyn, clearly pleased at such a remark from such a quarter.

"Oh, don't thank *me*," cut in Rachel Stetheril, tapping viciously with her stick. "So 's a butterfly pretty. Long on looks and short on brains. Most likely your head's chuck full of looking-glasses and fools in breeches. Where's Haddon?"

Still Evelyn smiled, accepting her great-grandaunt as a true philosopher accepts an unpleasant change in the weather.

"I haven't seen Mr. Haddon this morning," she answered quietly.

"Morning!" grunted the old woman. "It's afternoon, and time for lunch, and I told Haddon to be here at twelve. If the fool doesn't know which side his bread's buttered on, and who butters it for him, he doesn't know much."

Evelyn peeped slyly at her watch. The little golden hands pointed at two full minutes after twelve.

"Graham!" cried Mrs. Stetheril, lifting her sharp shrill voice with such sudden vehemence that fully half a dozen servants in the house and also out the grounds started anxiously. "Graham!"

"Yes, Mrs. Stetheril."

The answer in the expressionless voice of the young man with the frost-bitten face sounded ridiculously flat after the old woman's lively call. It was preceded by a cessation of the faint clicking of a distant typewriter and immediately followed by the sound of Adrian Graham's soft-footed approach.

"What do you think of this new secretary of Haddon's?" demanded Mrs. Stetheril. Of Evelyn, quite obviously, since not yet had Graham come out of the house.

"I—why, what should I think, aunty?" She lifted her very innocent-looking eyes to her aunt's. "I hardly know him, you know. He *seems* very nice."

"What does Haddon want a secretary for?" queried Mrs. Stetheril sharply, her eyes keen upon Evelyn's.

"Why," smiled Evelyn, "he says that he is very busy, and needs some one to take a lot of the routine work off his

hands. Also, he told me last night that he is writing a book, a sort of—”

“Book!” jeered the old woman. “Justin Haddon write a book! Is the man plumb mad?”

“I don’t know, aunty,” came pleasantly with Evelyn’s little laugh. “He says that there is a demand for a—oh, I don’t quite know what it is; a sort of handbook of legal information or something of that kind. And—”

“When did he tell you all this?” asked her aunt, eying her with sharpness vaguely mingled with suspicion.

“Last night. While we were—”

“Humph! Last night without any warning he takes on a secretary—Justin Haddon, who doesn’t need one any more than I need wings, and who’s as tight as a rain-barrel. On top of that he’s going to write a book! Oho! You’re here, are you?”

“Yes, Mrs. Stetheril. You called—”

“Don’t tell me what I did,” she snapped at Graham, who had come up so quietly that she had not heard him. “That’s no reason for you to come creeping up on me like a footpad.”

She glared at him belligerently for an instant and then jeeringly announced, “I always did have my suspicions of a man that went slinking around in rubber soles.”

“You may remember, Mrs. Stetheril,” he began with an assumption of dignity very unsuccessfully done under her hard eyes, a dignity which seemed actually pale, colorless, as though it were a thing he kept in the dark cellar of his being and now had dragged out into the sunlight, “that you, yourself suggested—”

“Shut up!” she cried out at him, jerking up her great stick as though she would strike him with it. “Shut up! What have you done about this Bond affair?”

“The bond affair?” he asked stiffly, conscious of Evelyn’s interested observation and being, after all, human. “May I ask what particular bond affair?”

“Oh, you dunce!” she clacked at him. “What particular bond affair! *The*

Bond affair. Bond, capital B-O-N-D—Bond! It’s a man’s name. A man might be named Bramble or Spinach, I suppose, if he wanted to. Some men ought to be named Tom Fool. I’m talking about Arnold Bond, a man, cashier of the Lockworth National Bank.”

It all came down upon poor Adrian Graham in an avalanche of hurtling, heated words, and though he got his mouth open and kept it open until she was done, no words from it came immediately. His face was red, and one less implacable than the black witch herself must have felt sorry for him.

“I telephoned Mr. Bond this morning, as per your instructions!” he at last got out. “He said that unfortunately nothing had been done yet. I urged him to give the matter his early attention—”

“Early attention!” sneered Rachel Stetheril, evidently bent upon *guerre à l’outrance*. “And I’m to wait like a simpering schoolgirl upon his pleasure and convenience, am I? You—you—you’re fired!” she ended bluntly.

“Really, Mrs. Stetheril,” he began weakly, “I fail to see—”

“So does a bat!” she cut him short. “That’s one reason you’re fired. Now, don’t stand there gasping. Pack your traps and get!”

“That’s one fool the less getting under my feet,” she grunted, less to Evelyn than to herself, as Graham turned and went swiftly and noiselessly back into the house. “And now what’s Haddon doing? Drat the man.”

“They’re coming!” cried Evelyn.

And in a moment they had swung into the driveway and drawn up in front of the house—Haddon and Ashe. They came quickly up the steps, Justin Haddon slightly in advance, his eye bright and eager, a little flush in his usually sallow cheeks. Behind him, more leisurely, came Robert Ashe, his hat already in hand as he caught sight of Evelyn and Mrs. Stetheril, his eyes going swiftly from the sour face bent over the cane to the smiling one lifted expectantly.

In Haddon's manner, as he greeted his employer pleasantly and then put out his hands to the girl, was to be marked a lack of the hint of nervousness of yesterday, its place taken by a sort of assurance which bespoke satisfaction with things as they were, confidence in his future. It was quite as though until now he had been attempting something which lay almost beyond his powers; as though now he were sure of himself.

Ashe, his eyes dancing with the joy of a splendid morning, watched Haddon and Evelyn with frank interest. Their relationship was not yet entirely plain to him, and he was interested in knowing what it was.

At times there was about Haddon the little air of proprietorship which suggested that vows had been interchanged; at times Evelyn seemed to accept him quite naturally as her future husband; at other times Evelyn had flashed her eyes at Ashe himself in a way which might be construed to read, "I am heart whole and fancy free!"

But it was only an instant that he watched them, forgetting Rachel Stetheril. He heard Haddon saying:

"You are looking wonderfully, Evelyn! One night with us has taken that tired look out of your eyes. You must never go back to the city."

He noticed that Haddon's voice rang with an ardor he had never detected in it before; he noticed that Evelyn looked at first pleased; then that a quick, half frown came to mar the pleasure in her eyes; and then he turned quickly, conscious of a keen, steady, wonderfully penetrating regard from the hard, inscrutable eyes of Rachel Stetheril.

She continued to stare at him a moment, her stick tapping at the porch floor, her scrutiny thrusting at him like a surgeon's lancet. Ashe met her gaze frankly, smiling into her fierce old eyes.

"So," she said after her abrupt fashion, "you think you're going to be Haddon's private secretary, eh?"

"Yes," he told her pleasantly.

"Understand stenography?" she shot at him.

"No, I don't; but it will hardly—"

"Typewrite?"

"Well enough to get across with it," he laughed. "I can't say that I'm an expert at it, but—"

A "but" was always a signal for an invasion by Rachel Stetheril's bellicose army of words, and now she made her sharp flank attack by demanding:

"Well, what *are* you expert on? Anything?"

"Life, lyric poetry and — and pumpkins!" He laughed back at her.

As she had done before he had turned, so now again did she study him, silently, her mouth clamped tight shut, her black witch-eyes unblinking under her gray brows.

"What do you mean by that?" she snapped. And then, as Ashe was framing a reply. "No; I haven't time for tomfoolery. Only, young man, don't you try to make fun of me! Remember that. Haddon!"

Haddon, releasing Evelyn's hand, turned to Mrs. Stetheril.

"Did you see Arnold Bond this morning? What did he say?"

"I didn't see him, Mrs. Stetheril. He had gone out to Jake Dutton's ranch about a mortgage."

"What do I care about Jake Dutton or his ranch or his mortgage or his wife or his cow!" she spat the words at him. "You're as bad as that fool Graham. Why in the devil didn't you go to Jake Dutton's after him?"

"Because," Haddon explained quite calmly, "it seemed to me that it would be better not to try to rush Bond unduly. He left word that he would see me this afternoon. And unfortunately conditions are such that we are in no position to coerce Bond in this matter."

"Conditions? What conditions?"

"Why," said Haddon slowly, "if we come right down to it we've got to do exactly what Bond says do. The law of the matter—"

"The law!" scoffed the old woman. "The law! Here a little hop-o'-my-thumb like you tells me about the law."

"Being a lawyer," returned Haddon, coloring a little under the whip of her words, "I naturally supposed that that was just what you had retained me for."

"If you ever get anywhere, Justin Haddon," she barked at him, "It'll be because of luck. Don't go to fooling yourself that you've got brains. If there's any law that counts in this valley it's because I made it. I fired Graham just now."

"Indeed?" Haddon, feeling no great interest, didn't pretend to feel any. But her next words brought that emotion quite unfeigned and keen into his eyes.

"So I'm going to take over your new secretary for mine. Steele," glaring again at Ashe, "you go to work for me. And right after lunch. And the first thing you do is call up Arnold Bond on the telephone and tell him that if he isn't knocking at my door in an hour's time I'm going to put him out of business if it takes every cent I've got. Have you got sense enough to do that?"

Ashe turned questioning eyes upon Haddon. Haddon, plainly surprised and no little disturbed, said quickly:

"But, Mrs. Stetheril, surely—"

"Oh, shut up!" she told him, falling back upon her familiar weapon. "If you don't like it you've got to lump it. I need Steele more than you do, and he's going to work for me. If you need a secretary so mighty bad all of a sudden go get one."

"The work I wanted Steele to do," began Haddon. "He is not exactly fitted—"

Rachel Stetheril lifted her stick and poked it out so that one end came to wavering rest under Haddon's nose.

"Justin Haddon," she reminded him, "you'd better not fool with me today. You walk as you're told or I'll hand you a dose of the same medicine I'm cooking up for Arnold Bond."

And having ended the discussion entirely to her satisfaction she led the way to

the dining-room, jerking along like a little dusty, venomous beetle.

CHAPTER XII.

BIG GAME.

ACROSS the book-littered top of a great table upon the third story of the Big House Justin Haddon scowled savagely while Robert Ashe, returning his regard, smiled.

"The old she-devil!" muttered Haddon angrily, but taking care not to speak loudly. "By God! I've got a mind to—"

Ashe waited a second, hoping the man would go on. Then seeing Haddon sinking back into a profound and gloomy thoughtfulness, he laughed lightly.

"Is she spoiling your game?" he asked. And then when Haddon continued to stare at him in that heavy silence and to pluck, pluck, pluck at his lip, he added softly: "Why not let me in on the know? It doesn't take a mind-reader to see that you're up to something crooked. Maybe I can help play the game—from the inside."

"Maybe you could," said Haddon. "Maybe you could!"

He got up and went to a window, flipping up the shade and standing there a moment looking out into the moonlit night. Ashe, turning a little where he sat, watched him with a keen interest which was not without its hint of amusement.

It struck him humorously that just now if there were in the world a man who should be worrying it was himself, and that, for some unguessed reason, Haddon had taken his load off of his shoulders. Had a third person just then looked in upon the two men, had he been told, "One of them is right now in the shadow of the gates of San Quentin," then must he have deemed Haddon the fugitive from justice.

"Do you know," said Haddon, wheeling suddenly, "that you are walking on damned thin ice?"

"Wrong again!" grinned the boy. "I am not walking at all! I soar high above the sordid earth through realms of ineffable joy. I am where I would be, transported by the hand of magic. Or, if you don't like my first figure, I've hitched my cart to the tail of your comet and am joy-riding through the clouds."

In Haddon's stare there were both curiosity and admiration.

"You're a cool young devil," he grunted.

"Suggesting the ice of your former remark," laughed Ashe. "Thin ice, I think you said? And that, in turn, implying a plunge?"

During the long afternoon Evelyn Daly had wandered idly about the grounds, been admired distantly by Huxter, the head gardener of whose warm approval she was by no means unconscious; had played snatches upon the piano, skimmed through the remaining pages of her book, and in other broken ways had spent the hours lonesomely.

For she had caught no glimpse after lunch of her aunt, nor of Haddon, nor yet of the new Mr. Steele. Mrs. Stetheril had kept both her impressed secretary and her attorney busy in her office.

Bond had called, and the old woman had scolded, threatened, abused him. Evelyn had peeped in at them, and had felt sorry for the good-looking Bond. He had shrugged his rather broad shoulders under the old woman's abuse, had kept perfect control of the muscles of his decidedly pleasant face, and had gone his way at last, making no promise to do as he was bid.

Then dinner, made hideous by Mrs. Stetheril at her worst, and Haddon and Ashe banished summarily to their suite of rooms on the third floor. Even now Evelyn, down-stairs, was reading aloud to her aunt, who, the girl more than suspected, was not listening.

"Have you seen this?" asked Haddon. He tossed a newspaper to the table in

front of Ashe and stood watching. The something in Justin Haddon's character which had forced him upward from the status of a poor farmer's boy to his present position of lawyer, sharing many of Rachel Stetheril's confidences, shone at this moment unhidden in Haddon's look. So far, at least, had he played the game of life his way, so far had he won. And now, whatever lay before him, he held the trump card.

But if he looked to see a sign of agitation in Ashe, then was he to be disappointed. Ashe, not without imagination, could have come pretty close to telling what was in the paper before he unfolded it.

True, the prominence of the article, the big boldness of the type, caused a flicker of surprise.

"Gee!" he said. "Who'd have thought they'd trot out their brass band this way—just for me!"

But as he read further, catching the salient statements through the wordiness of the story, he added:

"The band isn't for me after all, is it? It's for Mrs. Stetheril and the Stetheril diamond!"

"Lieutenant Ambrose, of the San Francisco police," he read aloud, "who for some time has been seeking such evidence as would secure the conviction of the man known as Ladyfingers, promises an early arrest. He is convinced that the thief is in hiding either in Oakland or San Francisco. All possible avenues of escape are carefully guarded. It is expected that Mrs. Stetheril, whose fifty-thousand-dollar diamond was stolen, will offer a large reward for its return. Here!" cried Ashe, looking up with the new interest in his eyes. "What's this? Didn't she get her diamond back?"

"You *are* a cool young devil," grunted Haddon. "But look here, my friend. You can keep the diamond; I don't want it, and Mrs. Stetheril won't need it. That's what you get out of this if you do what you're told to do. That, and a chance to keep out of the penitentiary."

Ashe returned thoughtfully to his paper with pursed lips.

"The diamond's gone," he said at last, tossing the paper aside; "and I didn't get it. Who did? By Jupiter," and he began laughing softly, "it's Ambrose!"

"Ambrose?" frowned Haddon. "What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you see?" cried the young fellow as though at a very rare thought. "Ambrose comes along to arrest me. I get the diamond into my fingers. Ambrose breaks into the game, and half breaks my arm with the butt of his gun. The stone falls into the grass. I speed up my departure. The diamond still lies where it fell. There's all kind of confusion for a moment. Then Ambrose comes shooting after me—*shooting wild*—and I get away—and the diamond's gone! Do you know, my dear Mr. Haddon, my beloved benefactor, that if I went back to the city by the morning train and called upon Lieutenant Ambrose, he'd lend me the money to buy a ticket East?"

"Why do you try to lie to me?" demanded Haddon sternly. "Do you think that I'd believe a thing like that? I myself saw you with the thing in your hand."

"You can turn out my pockets and aim an X-ray at my tummy," grinned Ashe. "There's no fifty thousand dollars' worth of jewelry either upon my person nor within it. Now Ambrose, if you happen to know him quite well—"

"Is crooked enough to do anything," responded Haddon. "That I'll admit. And further, if you like, I'll tell you that I don't care a snap whether you got it, or he got it, or it's still lying back there in the grass."

"To be sure," murmured Ashe, with a great air of nonchalant unconcern, "it's only fifty thousand dollars! What's that?"

And then, looking up at Haddon with that frank young grin of his, he added lightly:

"Just the same, when a man turns up his nose at fifty thousand, he's got some-

thing big in sight. Personally, like you, I rather prefer the big stakes."

"Steele," said Haddon, "do you fully realize that by the turn of my hand I can put you in the penitentiary for a good, long time?"

"Fully," answered Ashe. "Don't think me ungrateful."

"Naturally," went on Haddon evenly, "I couldn't anticipate this crazy interference of Mrs. Stetheril's. But, if you've got the brains I think you have, I can't see that her action is going to make any great difference. It is likely that as long as she keeps you here she'll want me on hand. But in case you should stay and I return to my own house—well, then, there are two things for you to remember."

"One being San Quentin?" suggested Ashe.

"One being that if you try to leave before I tell you to, I have a telephone in my house. I can get the telegraph office, the railroad stations, the county sheriff and San Francisco, all in about the time you could walk a mile. Is that quite clear?"

"Eminently."

"And the other thing is that I am, just as you suggested, playing for big, very big stakes. I need you in my game. When I'm through with you, you can go. Free, and with money in your pockets. Do you understand?"

"Enough to see that I've got to be good," returned Ashe. "I suppose that that's as far as your explanations go just now?"

"Yes," said Haddon, with great finality in his tone. He took up from the table a thick, bulging envelope and turned to the door. "I am going down now for a word with Mrs. Stetheril. You," he added dryly, "may spend your time answering for yourself as best you can any questions you'd like to put to me."

"Not on your life, my dear fellow," Ashe retorted gaily. "I'm going to look at the moon and dream golden dreams."

Haddon went down to his appointment with Mrs. Stetheril. Ashe drew a great leather chair close to the open window, and with his hands clasped behind his head, sat leaning back comfortably and looking out across the sweep of fields.

"Is life what a man makes it?" he asked himself. "Or is a man what life makes him? Now I wonder—"

But his pondering had little to do with Haddon or Haddon's possible schemes. Of these matters Ashe would set himself to learn in the days to follow. Now, because obviously he had come to some sort of a turning point in his own life, he let his thoughts range backward and forward.

In meditative review, he passed over the life San Francisco had given him, the lean years of his early childhood, brightened only by his mother; the hard years of his earlier struggles, the fuller years of promise that had come more decently.

"I am what I am," he told himself, "because my life is making me. Just how much, after all, I wonder, do I have to say in the making of my life?"

At last he came to see in the end of the matter a sort of compromise. He was a thief because of external circumstance. He was an expert in his profession because of intrinsic qualities. He was a gentleman from inherent instinct—and in the moonlight outside, strolling through the gardens, was Evelyn Daly.

Ashe, watching her a little while, frowned. Then he laughed. And when Evelyn, lifting her face toward his window, raised a hand to adjust a big rose in her hair, Ashe found the picture she made quite perfect, and getting to his feet, went down-stairs.

CHAPTER XIII.

EVERLYN UPON A PEDESTAL—ALMOST.

INDISPUTABLY the primary function of the eye is vision. Yet it must be imagined that very early in the annals of human history the eye assumed the

second function of interpreter between two individuals of different tongues. It has an eloquence which is denied to mere vocal utterance.

Evelyn's eyes, lifted fleetingly to Ashe's, both spoke and harkened for his greeting. They held his a brief moment, telling of warm friendliness. Then, swiftly, she dropped them shyly, her lashes sweeping her cheeks. The thing was characteristic of the girl.

"You were just coming in?" asked Ashe. "It is early; it is a wonderful night—"

Evelyn laughingly turned and went back with him out upon the moonlit porch.

"For just ten minutes," she acquiesced.

"But surely—" began Ashe.

"Or, if you make yourself very interesting, maybe eleven!" she amended, her eyes flashing up to meet his, then eluding them again, hiding under her lowered lids. "If you'll talk to me about something I am simply *dying* to know."

"I promise," he said lightly. They went down the steps. "Whether I know anything about the subject or not; whether I'm to speak upon Eskimo morals or the mechanism of an aeroplane."

"Oh, but this is something you know all about!" They turned down an inviting graveled walk bordered with rose-bushes. "It is the psychology of a thief."

In spite of him, Ashe was startled. For a moment he did not speak. Seasoned in dangers, trained to accept the unexpected without a tremor, he none the less felt now a shock of surprise. To have Evelyn Daly say to him, quite as though she were mentioning some such thing as a rose-bush casually passed, "Tell me about the psychology of a thief," set his mind leaping through the darkness encompassing it for elusive explanations.

He kept his eyes keenly speculative upon the girl's face.

"The psychology of a thief?" he asked in a moment. "Shall I seek to entertain

with theory and speculation? Or will you insist upon definite information?"

"The real truth!" she exclaimed. "I can theorize myself."

"And no doubt I am expected to know all about this very interesting matter?"

"Of course!" she told him. "Why not? If you were just a common policeman, I'd expect you to be stupid about it. But being a man who is sufficiently interested in crime to become an amateur detective—"

Ashe's vastly amused laugh, in which there was a note of relief all unhidden, drew her eyes wonderingly to him. For the instant he had actually forgotten that as Mr. Steele he had a legitimate right to lecture upon such as Robert Ashe.

"So," he said, "you would know about crime and criminals? Do you know, in a land like this, on a night like this, with a lady like you, Miss Daly, this seems a strange thing to talk about?"

Unconsciously he grouped her with this rarely beautiful country garden through which they loitered, with this perfect night of spring. Evelyn smiled.

"Why?" she asked. And then: "Tell me," she insisted. "I have read books; and in all of them there are men or women who commit crimes. I knew a servant once who stole some spoons. I have never known any one who made a profession of wrong-doing. I have never, until I saw you, known a man who knew other men making a profession of wrong-doing. A girl raised as I have been, living as I have lived, sees only the surface of things, gets no glimpse of what lies under that surface. *You* have come in touch with real life, with powerful motives, with crises. And I am on fire with curiosity!"

"You give me a big field," smiled Ashe, "and rather vague instructions."

"Tell me," she said eagerly, "about this man they call Ladyfingers! Oh, I have read all the papers say. Is it true that he is young and as handsome as a Greek god? That he is brave and wonder-

fully capable? That he has defied the police for years, being cleverer than they? That he is hardly more than a boy and is already steeped in crime? Have you ever seen him, talked with him?"

"Dear lady," answered Ashe quite gaily, "I have seen the monster, talked with him. As for the Greek god part of it, I dare say the papers are right. Let us say even handsomer than Vulcan, though perhaps a trifle less godlike than Apollo. As for all of the other superlatives, I'd hazard the guess that he's entirely human."

"Is he a monster? Is he human? Which?"

"He is what you term a professional criminal," replied Ashe, looking at her curiously. "Doesn't that settle it?"

At first he had wondered how he might lead the talk into another channel; now he was quite as anxious to go on with it as was Evelyn. She wanted to look through his eyes upon the underworld of crime; he wanted suddenly to know how she felt toward such as Ladyfingers.

"Tell me," she commanded.

"Well, then," he began, "he strikes me as being utterly human. I'd say that he enjoys life much as you and I do. That he has a taste for good music no less than for good things to eat and drink. That he'd enjoy a night like tonight in such company as yours, even as I am enjoying it. That he has the soul to enjoy swimming in the surf, playing chess, such things as Keats and Burns and even the Faerie Queene. I have known him to read it. I'd say that he gets as much joy out of a rather hard nut safely cracked as does your Aunt Rachel out of one of her big business deals properly driven to the satisfactory ending. That he has his moments of elation, his times of despondency, although they are rare; his ambitions, and his own sort of ideals. In short, that he is quite human—even as you and I!" he ended with secret relish in the words.

"Go on!" cried the girl, all eager interest.

"I'd say," continued Ashe thoughtfully, "that this man Ladyfingers would have little compunction in breaking any law that a wise body of legal-minded men ever made; that he'd rob a safe or pick a pocket right merrily. That he wouldn't hurt a little child or an animal wilfully; that he'd give as gladly as he'd take; that he'd find a sort of pleasure in robbing a man or woman so terribly rich as your aunt; that his lifetime of wrong-doing has had in it, some few stray kind acts; that he has good impulses and bad; that, while admittedly human, he is none the less flesh and blood."

Evelyn's eyes were sparkling with interest.

"Why," she broke out impulsively, "you make a hero out of him! He must be splendid! Think of robbing a safe with a volume of poetry in his pocket!"

Ashe blushed. Strive as he might, he could not keep a flood of blood from rushing into his face. He had been speaking of himself, and of himself he had made Evelyn think as of a splendid hero! He felt suddenly as though she must know that he was speaking of himself, that she must look upon him as a man shamelessly boasting. He had wanted her to think of him—to think of Ladyfingers—as he actually was. And knowing that she had heard and read the evil things to be said of him, he had spoken too strongly of the other side.

"A hero? Hardly," he said swiftly. "Remember his attack on Mrs. Stetheril—"

"And the man he shot," added Evelyn. "How could he do that, if, as you say, he is human like you and me? To shoot down a man merely standing by—of course, the bullet was meant for one of the policemen—"

"I don't believe," said Ashe, interrupting her, "that it was really Ladyfingers who fired that shot. If the man should die—"

"Oh, he won't die. Auntie had Mr. Graham telephone to the city for particulars. It was rather a slight wound, after all. But when this wonderful thief fired the shot, he could not have known that he would not kill."

"And yet," he offered, "I have heard it said that Ladyfingers never carried a gun; that he has said that if he couldn't get out of a tight place without shooting his way out, he'd stay in it."

"Then," she asked, puzzled, "if he didn't do the shooting, who did?"

Ashe laughed.

"Before now," he told her, "an enthusiastic policeman, shooting in the dark, has been known to hit the wrong target!"

Together they went down the rose-bordered walk, strolling slowly through the moonlight, Robert Ashe, thief and fugitive, with Evelyn Daly, the heiress to many millions.

Whether or not the great adventure was coming to him down the graveled paths of Mrs. Stetheril's gardens, Ashe did not yet know. He did know that he did not want Evelyn Daly to think of just the bad in Ladyfingers. He did know that now and then her skirt brushed against him, that her arm touched his sleeve, that as Mr. Steele, Justin Haddon's secretary, she was quite ready to accept his companionship. He did know that Justin Haddon had merely to use a telephone to remove him both from Evelyn's side and from the quiet peace of the moonlit gardens.

"If you feel so great an interest in such as this Ladyfingers," he suggested, "why haven't you asked Mr. Haddon for information? Surely he, being a lawyer—"

Evelyn laughed softly.

"He's just Justin," she answered. "Good old prosaic, matter-of-fact, hard-working Justin. He wouldn't understand me; he'd think I'd gone mad. He'd perhaps be shocked at me, finding me unladylike. He'd say, 'Why, the man's a crook. You couldn't possibly have any

interest in such as he.' Then he would begin telling me something he'd call interesting about mortgages and deeds and politics."

"But," and Ashe laughed with her, "he isn't quite as bad as that! And he'd know the two sides of a criminal; he really should know them far better than I."

"But he doesn't," she announced positively. "He looks upon a criminal just exactly as Huxter, the head gardener, looks upon a potato-bug. Something to crush for its menace, not to ponder over. He doesn't see the mystery and the romance of life."

Her eyes lifted, held his a moment, were hidden under her lashes.

"He's an honest, hard-working man who sees everything in the world from the one point of view of honesty and hard work. From a poor farmer's boy, he has made himself a lawyer known all over the country when he's only thirty-six. He couldn't have done that if he hadn't let himself become a machine." She hesitated briefly; then with sudden im-

petuosity she cried: "A plodding, prosaic machine!"

"I thought—" began Ashe, and stopped.

But Evelyn chose to let him know that she understood.

"I was just a little fool last summer when I came up here," she said swiftly.

"And he is so earnest and stubborn about anything he wants—"

She broke off, whirled suddenly, and caught up her skirts.

"The ten minutes are up!" she laughed at him. "Good night, Mr. Steele!"

And she flashed away from him, racing away through the moonlight, back to the house. As she ran a big, white rose tumbled from her hair. Ashe stooped and caught it up.

"After all," he asked himself lightly, "why Haddon, the plodding crook, rather than Ladyfingers?"

And as Evelyn, pausing breathless in the doorway, turned to wave good night, he lifted the rose to his lips, bowing over it as though it had been a lady's hand.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.



THE BREATH OF SPRING

BY MARGARET G. HAYS

HE kissed her warm red lips.
 Her long, black lashes swept her ivory cheek,
 Her supple form quivered in his embrace,
 Her breath came gaspingly.
 Suddenly his arms relaxed,
 He turned away.
 "I must go," he said huskily.
 The door closed after him—
 It sounded like a knell.
 Then she knew Remorse.
 "Why, oh, why did I eat those tender green onions?"
 She sighed sobbingly.

Twenty Thousand Iron Men



by
Edwin Palmer

DON'T it beat four aces and the cuter how popular a guy gets when he wakes up on a rainy Tuesday and finds a barrel of kopecks wished on him? It seems to come just as natural as snow in the winter or molasses out of a hoppergrass.

Somehow, Jay Percival Billings clean forgets he has an old-maid aunt still livin' over in Jersey. She isn't, but Perce finds a note in his mail that says he can give her the last once-over if he's fast enough. It seems she's got a date to lead a procession in her own honor, but she isn't goin' to know anythin' about it. Course it's a terrible blow to poor Perce, but he bears his great sorrow in silence. He's a regular glutton for the sad stuff.

Quite a leap for such a mere youth, you're sayin'. And pretty soft. But don't fool yourself. Twenty thousand dollars ain't much when you say it quick; but to a guy that never was anythin' but a neckwear clerk it's some little bank-roll. And everythin' considered, you simply gotta give Perce credit for watchin' his step.

What does he do? Well, outside of

tellin' the glad tidin's to a few that's honest-to-goodness dummies, he sits tight. Just pretends he has lockjaw and none of the regular crowd gets wise to his roll till they hear he's the main squeeze, high muck-a-muck, *et al*, of the Bonafico.

J'ever hear of the Bonafico? No?

Neither did Perce up to now. But when he begins to nose around the market he meets up with a bunch of smooth talkers, self-confessed big guns, and the whole gang is about as secretive as the front page of the *Cokaville Gazette*.

Perce starts hobnobbin' around with these plutes, listenin' to the tips fly to and fro, but sittin' as tight as Gabriel's drum—or was it a horn? They tells Perce (strictly on the q. t.) that they're movie magnates in disguise. They meant disgust. But they're magnets all right. They can draw anythin' from a cartoon to a carbuncle. After a while Perce learns that they're pioneers of the industry, intendin' to start a nice, select company on the side; just to produce some big feature plays, world-beaters.

They're callin' it by a pet name, Bonafico; from Bonanza Film Company. It

woulda been flim but they had to leave out the flam. Get me?

The first reel they're unwindin' on the eager public (I mean Perce) is twenty thousand shares at five bones a copy. And they're offerin' inducements in the form of swell pictures of brother magnets, guys that made a million over night. They calls 'em off by their nicknames to Perce, and when he don't blink at that they even pull the old one about knowin' 'em when they didn't have a whole shirt on their backs. They wind up by tellin' Perce he's just in time to get in on the ground floor and likewise a toe-hold on Miss Fortune.

Howsomever, Perce isn't quite thick enough to place the whole B. R. on Bonafico to win; but he does sit in to the tune of two-thousand portions. He knows the meanin' of reserve funds, so he salts the rest of his unearned kale in the safety-first.

The proceeds off Perce and about five hundred more shares that manage to squeeze through the market without gettin' spotted is sufficient to open the Bonafico ball.

Right off the reel they rent a sweet of offices that make the honest film companies look like a bunch of second-hand stores. In there they just hang around sendin' ads to the dailies and peddlin' out shares to the would-be plutes.

Then they have the official election, and after the votes is counted, guess who's the big choice for the top of the heap? Well, it's no less than our own Jay Percival. They're makin' him president or nothin', high grand master of ceremonies, and with everybody votin' one way the eggsits is clogged. Perce goes in on the run.

The next few weeks Perce is kept about as idle as a one-armed camera-man with the seven-year itch. He's got a swell secluded private office all to himself, just like a regular president. The shares may not be goin' extra good, but as Perce gets a lot of odd jobs shoved his way, he's too full to notice anythin' like that. He don't have a great deal to say that counts, but then presidents ain't supposed to say

much anyhow. All they got to do is write a bunch of notes.

A big, florid gent, built like a hogshhead and callin' himself C. Gustave Donore, has the most to say. Director-general is his official capacity, and he fills it as easy as beer does him. He generally stands around inside a loud, checked suit, directin' the victims where to place their change, just so there'll be no mistake about the dividends.

Gusty musta been a politician once, because he dotes on cigars and strong liquids, and he's got a frontispiece that ten feet away you'd swear was a hind-quarter of beef.

One day C. Gustave suggests to Perce that it wouldn't be a bad stunt to select some promisin' actorines from the great unemployed army of would-be stars. And our noble president falls for the idea with a thull and dickenin' sud.

"Blooeey! Blooeey!" chuckles Perce. "Poultry is my dish."

Deluded youth! What he don't know about the female of the species 'll fill a Chinese dictionary and hang down over the sides. Just the same, there's a lot of us not so green as Perce that wouldn't pass up the suggestion.

Howsomever, it looks as good to him as it would to any live-wire, hard-headed president. Besides, it'll be a change from his irregular duties, and they do say that a change is as good as a rest. That's no pipe dream, either. Lots of times a change brings more than one arrest.

Right here is where Perce gets the big idea without the headache, and he shoots it to the movie magazines and local papers. He's callin' his cute scheme the Bonafico Beauty Contest, and all the swell lookers east of the Golden Gate is invited to send in a copy of their frontispiece.

Do they respond? All Perce has time to do while it lasts is hide behind a stogie in his private office and give the answers the up-and-down.

They come in every pose known to the sportin' world, and Perce picks the flaws,

likewise the perfections. And to say the supply is limited on account of the war would be a smooth-faced fabrication. Every mail brings 'em by the dozen, and the originals is anywhere from nine to ninety. There's long ones and short ones and ones in between; and they're *all* famous beauties. They admit it in spite of the glarin' contradictions. B'l'ëve me, the faces on some of 'em would stop a clock in the dark.

Well, in the final drove he finds the first-money girl. She's in a set of poses that Perce decides has the rest of 'em buffaloed. Talk about personal magnifiqué! Say, this one has Helen, the Troy cloak-model, lashed to the mast, and compared to the original Venus, she's got that popular burlesquer lookin' like a rag doll in a dusty attic. If old Webster was alive and took one flash at her he'd cross out the word beauty and cash in his chips. And the title she's sportin'; look it over: Venus de Normandie.

When Perce recovers from the shock he submits the evidence to Donore and the rest for approval. She gets by without a struggle. They'd agree on the Queen of Sheba if she'd sent in her picture. So Venus gets the Bonafico contract and the also-rans pull down some honorable mention.

Well, a few mornin's after acceptin' the nomination, in blows Venus. And b'l'ëve me, she's all to the mustard and then some. All Perce can do when she strolls in is stare, till she wakes him up with a smile. When she turns that on, Perce is willin' to swear that he's sneaked by St. Peter at the big gate.

"Good morning," breathes V, tappin' her number ones on Bonafico's best rug. "Can you tell me where I might find Mr. Billings?"

Perce finally pulls himself together.

"Why, er—yes. Won't you sit down?" He waves her to a mahogany chair. "Er—I'm him."

V arches her brows. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she coos.

Then she produces a dainty pasteboard

and hands it to Perce. Course it's unnecessary, but Perce receives because it's his chance to close in and work a lingerin' hand-clinch. But he slants at the card:

MISS VENUS DE NORMANDIE

Ain't that some little monniker?

Perce chortles like a miser. Here he is in his private office alone with Venus. It's enough to start a normal guy's blood after the Vanderbilt cup.

"I don't know how I shall ever thank you," she starts in, "I have always dreamed of just such a chance as this."

Perce waves his hand Carnegie style.

"It is nothing for one with your personality and physical perfection," he announces. V pinks up behind the ears.

"I have no doubt whatever," he goes on, "either of your ability or instant success as soon as we commence making pictures."

And, honest, I can't see it otherwise myself. Not because I'm a heavy investor, but it certainly looks as though the Bonafico queen 'll make 'em all arise and behold.

"When shall the pictures begin?" she queries.

"Oh, the time is not far away," smiles Perce, pompous. "Then the whole country 'll be ravin' about you."

When he springs that one, she comes across with another of those angelic expressions, and Perce is wonderin' in what part of the town the cosiest flats are.

"And about the contract?" she quizzes. "Do I really get one?"

"Most assuredly, Miss de Normandie," says Perce, "I'll see to that immediately. In fact I was just about to discuss it with Mr. Donore."

Some guys would get a spasm if they talked with as nifty a dame as Venus, but another session like this for Perce and he'll have W. J. B. licked to a shadow on the oratory stuff.

At this opportunitical moment the door

swings open and who wafts gaily in but ponderous old Donore, he of the corned-beef complexion.

"Ah, good morning," he oozes, standin' at present arms. Then he slips Perce the high sign for a knockdown to the lovely lady.

"Allow me," says Perce, scrapin' the rug with his front hair. "Miss de Normandie, I present Mr. Donore, director-in-chief of the company.

"Mr. Donore, this is our prize-winner, Miss de Normandie."

The general director shoots out a pudgy mitt, and b'l'ave me, V's personality saturates him just like it did Perce, only different.

"Ah, Miss de Normandie," he stutters, "I am overcome with—with—"

"Circumference!" prompts V, and they both grin out loud.

"That's no dream," chuckles Perce, takin' a flash at Donore's fifty-two waist. So they all three sits down.

"What have you to suggest in regard to a contract for our future star?" asks Perce.

The general director folds his puny paws, squints once again at the queen, and tries to look wise.

"I should say a three-year term at ten thousand per," says he, and Perce agrees with the suggestion prompt.

"Just my idea," says he; "if the figure suits Miss de Normandie." And he shoots a benevolent smirk at V.

She lets go of a gasp.

"Oh! It is much more than I expected," she informs, modest. "I don't see how I can ever be worth it."

"Don't worry," snickers Donore, "you'll be worth that to us easy."

But somehow Perce doesn't harmonize with the way Donore is slantin' their leadin' lady. But he gives her an order for a month's pay in advance, and that ties her up with Bonafico.

Then Perce shows her round the works, but he's careful not to linger too long in one place. You get me, doncha? It's risky business leavin' as promisin' a chick

as V travel without a guardeen among a bunch of males that don't give a hoot whose girl they fall for.

Maybe he ain't publishin' just how deep he's in, but he's far enough gone to insist on havin' the honor of payin' her way through a swell eatery. And she's willin'.

Sizzlin' Perce 'll do nothin' by halves, so he tips her off to a date in his private office just before eatin' time, and out he goes on the run. About an hour later he's back again, all laundered up like an Easter shirt. And he ain't such a poor-lookin' scout at that when he's washed and ironed. He's flauntin' a super-gorgeous tie that's been invented by a simp named Bakst. It almost queers him, but outside of that he's lookin' the water, the goods.

V's waitin' for him in the office, but as to how she's lookin', words fail me. I didn't know there could be such a peach in the world with a father and mother that's a pair.

Howsomever, they enjoy a drop in the elevator, and in a couple more minutes they're wheezin' down town in a taxi. The taxi's wheezin' the most, but Perce is a close second. His patience begins to wobble like a plater on the homestretch, and by the time they're feedin' he's all ready to start somethin'.

"Do you ever allow yourself to think of marriage, Miss de Normandie?" And when he says it, he's that afraid of himself as to let a whole mouthful of Eddie-de-foy-gras go the wrong way.

"Please, Mr. Billings, let's not speak of that now," says V, switchin' to somethin' else.

"Do you know, I'm so interested in the pictures that I have hired a gentleman to teach me the fine points of actin'?"

Perce's fork stops half-way to the main entrance. "You have?" he groans.

"Yes," says she, kind of breathless. "Isn't that all right, Mr. Billings?"

Perce subsides. It looks to him as though the Bonafico lead could cop the Innocents' race in a walk.

"Oh, I suppose it's conventional enough," he tells her, reluctant like. "But if you had only consulted me, I might have been able to suggest a more suitable partner."

Ain't that a self-denyin' little way Perce has?

"Who, for instance?" smiles V. "Perhaps it is not too late yet."

"Oh, I can't say offhand, but in a pinch—well—I might try it myself."

She pipes up a titter.

"Ha! Ha! Mr. Billings! You make me laugh. You're such a perfect John Alden."

"And if I don't look out for yours truly," persists Perce, touchin' off a paper pipe, "who will?"

"It's hard telling who might have that privilege in the distant future," counters V, kind of hangin' on to her words dreamy like.

It's right here that Perce takes the final slant at his hand, and, b'l'eve me, it looks good. He catches his breath quick.

"Miss de Normandie!" says he, real feverish; "is it reasonable to suppose that you'd think of doing such a thing for me *sometime*?"

V's almost caught nappin', but she comes to and calls.

"Why, Mr. Billings," says she, registerin' oodles of fake surprise; "you must recollect that I haven't known you a whole day yet."

And when she bores him with her nonpareil china-blues, Perce's engine backfires and skips like a four-year-old jitney. But he ain't droppin' out on a deal like this.

"That's all right," says Perce. "Think it over. Take all the time you want, I'll wait. You can let me know any time; tomorrow will do, or the day after."

And speakin' about cool. Can they beat that in Iceland?

Well, V stayin' right with him leaves 'em both waitin' for the draw and the future at even money's hangin' on by its teeth. So they're through with the eats and he takes her joy-ridin'.

It's three times around before she blows in again, and when she does, a guy in the office tells her Perce is away for the day. But knowin' she's welcome, she finds the chair at his desk. The seat is empty and V's out of breath so she does it a favor and sits.

She ain't there long when she decides that her golden tresses need recoilin'. The door's shut and she's all by her lonesome, so down comes the hair. And just as she's puttin' it back there's footsteps approachin'. V makes a fast hop, landin' all nerved up behind a Japanese screen in the corner. Then she takes a flash at the door. It opens, and who's the intruders but Donore himself and a crafty, lop-eared guy with a beak like a cockatoo. It's Le Bart, the Bonafico treasurer, and they both flop like they're here on a vacation.

"Now here's the dope," says beefy Donore, comin' right down to business. "We've got to sell every one of these shares before we can make a picture. We need the money to build a first-class studio. Then, there's our talented beauty, Miss de Normandie. She wants to get started, and you can't blame her. But here's the point:

"Somebody inside has got to buy the shares because we've got enough outsiders in now. If it wasn't that my money is all tied up I'd spear them quick, and I've got a big bunch of them now. But we've simply got to dispose of them at once."

Lop-eared Le Bart is usin' his lops like a prodigal son.

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Donore," he says; "but what can I do? I'm all tied up myself. If only Mr. Billings would take them."

V's so still she's afraid of herself, and she's plumb sorry she ducked, but it's too late to butt in now. I'm guessin' she ain't wise that when Donore horned into Perce's favorite chair, he spotted her in the glass opposite and winked at Le Bart. So she's still hopin' they beat it.

"Yes, Mr. Billings is the one," says Donore, shakin' his head. "But I'm afraid we can't persuade him to help us.

He's kind of shy. Rather thinks he has enough on his hands for the present."

Le Bart nods, flaps his ears, then slants at his watch.

"I regret it Mr. Donore, but I am obliged to leave you for a few moments. I have an appointment."

"'Sall right," grins the leadin' heavy, "I'll see you this afternoon."

Le Bart shows his heels, and with him out of sight, V's feelin' a trifle better. But Donore's showin' no signs of chasin' himself, so V prepares for the worst. Then out she pops.

Donore grabs at his heart and nearly has apoplexy. Course he's right again in a couple of minutes. Even if he is surprised though, he ain't hearin' any apologies.

"Who has a better right in here?" says he. "Why, Mr. Billings would give you his right eye if he thought you could use it. I had no idea that I might be intruding, and I sincerely beg your pardon."

So V throws a smile or two at him and that evens things up. Ain't it wonderful what they can do at the right time? A smile, I mean.

"I was wondering," adds Donore, "if there is any possible way of inducing Mr. Billings to take the remaining few shares. You see, the sooner they're sold the quicker we commence making pictures. And you take it from me, they're going to be pictures with a capital P." Donore's fairly oozin' now.

"It does seem too bad that some one don't take them," V sympathizes.

"It is that," says he, "and there is only one hope of persuading him, as far as I can see. May I suggest that you try your influence, Miss de Normandie?"

"My influence," mocks V, sudden. "I'm sure I don't know of anything I could do."

"Now, young lady," chides Donore, shakin' his bulky old finger playful. "That's the part I'm leaving to you. And just to make it interesting, I'll give you five hundred dollars for pin-money if he takes the shares inside of three weeks."

Then the old geezer lolls back in Perce's favorite chair and twiddles his thumbs. Honest, he's just about as invitin' as a cannibal chief that ain't seen his natural eats for six summers.

"You are really too generous," comes back V, "and I thank you kindly; but I couldn't think of accepting the money. I shall feel sufficiently rewarded when I see myself as others see me, on the screen."

Donore shoots out a big front hoof.

"That's the spirit, Miss de Normandie!" he spouts; "as long as you feel that way you may be sure of success."

So he gives her the gentle by-by and V breezes out, leavin' the old fakir alone. When she's gone he chortles way down in his shoes and his flabby features is talkin' out loud, and they're sayin': "It's just like coppin' bonbons from the infant."

Early the next mornin' Perce canters in, fresh as a canterlope, and he's pipin' hot for the big kill. He's been overhauled in shipshape style by the only American barber west of Greenwich (village), and he's smellin' of the flower in his coat with his nose.

Somehow Perce is harborin' a hunch that this is the day of big doin's, and I don't know as he's got such a punk steer at that. Maybe he's steppin' out, high, wide, and sure, but there's more than one kind of hop acts that way on a guy. To tip you straight though, Perce has got such an overdose of this double-harness brand under his skin that he ain't sure whether he'll get hitched up to-morrow or Thursday.

Howsomever, when he stops slashin' his mail long enough to pipe off who's doin' the same by him, he don't have to decide. She does it for him. It's to-morrow ab-so-lutely, and till then the sky is the limit.

Like he's made of a bunch of steel springs, Perce vacates the presidential chair in favor of the first lady of movie-land.

"Ah, good morning, Miss de-er-Venus."

Greetings and salutations." Then he gives her the friendly mitt, brow-high fashion.

V sends a smile at him that busts the Billings's speedometer and makes his pulse turn a handspring.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" he adds, and accordin' to the signs there's goin' to be a showdown at once.

She nods casual and begins to study the Japanese screen like there's a load on her mind.

"Great day for a sentence," suggests Perce.

"For a what?" says Venus, comin' to.

"A sentence, a life sentence! How about mine?"

V's back to the Japanese screen again.

"Go to it!" says Perce, "you're the judge, jury, and all the witnesses."

But V kind of sobers up before she pulls her speech.

"Oh, Mr. Billings, I can't think of marriage now, really I can't. You know it would kill all my chances for a career. Why, Mr. Donore says he doesn't know when we shall start making pictures, and I want to make good in those first."

"Then my chances are as good as any one's?" queries Perce, brightenin' up around the mouth.

"Indeed, it isn't that," says V, "but, Mr. Billings, I could say a great deal more the day I finish my first picture."

"I'm afraid I don't get you," he tells her. "You're not tongue-tied, are you?"

She's kind of flushed when he says that, but she comes back.

"It's this way Mr. Billings. I heard them talking about pictures, and they seem to agree that it is up to you. If you would buy the shares that are left, we could start work right away, as soon as the studio is built. And they're all down-hearted because they don't think you will do it."

Perce starts shiftin' around uncomfortable, like he's been cornered.

"Well," says he, "I don't see why I should. I may be the president, and lots of other things, but I'm no hog. Any-

way, er—Venus, I care more about you than all the money in the town."

"Do you?" coos V. "Then won't you do *me* the favor of buying them?"

"Sure, Venus dear, if you'll wed."

She drops her eyes, coy like, and smiles him an answer. Then and there Perce starts to go into a clinch.

"Please, not here," murmurs V, "and besides you've got to make a bargain first."

"You're the doctor," he grins.

"Then fill out the check and promise me faithfully to keep our engagement a secret until my first picture is shown."

"Done!" says Perce, and just as she drops her gaze he leans over and steals one right off the top of the pack.

V gets pink and red to the ears.

"You silly," says she, "what if some one was looking?" But she squeezes his hand when she says it.

"We should fret," answers Perce. Then, without battin' an eyelash, he signs over all of his roll but a thou'.

"There," handin' her the check, "you can have the honors."

"Oh, Mr. Billings!"

"Mr. Billings!"

"Perce, dear, then. How can I ever thank you?"

Jay Percival grins out loud.

"I'll show you how," says he. And as she turns around he swipes another, but she's gone before he can repeat.

Perce's cup of joy is just about full, but he's stumped for a way to celebrate till V shows up again and helps him out.

"Mr. Donore says it's the luckiest move you ever made," she tells Perce, "and he's planning a trip over to New Jersey for this afternoon. He's going to select a site for the studio. Won't that be lovely?"

But the vision Perce gets of him and V occupyin' a machine by 'emselves is the only part that looks lovely to him.

Howsomever, when it comes time to start the ride, Donore and the rest finds they have a pile of work on hand, but if Perce 'll pick out a good place to build

on, they'll all look it over to-morrow or the next day. They're playin' right into Perce's hand, and he's so tickled he char-acters the best limonazine in the town that ain't workin'. Then he gives the word and they're off.

They're just missin' the low places outside the town when V looks around for her handbag. That's missin' too.

"Oh, Perce! I must go back!" she gasps. "Every cent I own is in it."

"It's safe enough," says he, "if you left it in the office."

"Yes, but I don't know whether I did or not, and if it's lost I want to advertise it."

"You win," whispers Perce.

So back they goes, and while Perce lolls outside, plannin' their honeymoon, V's shootin' up to the Bonafico hangout.

When she reaches the main office she tries the door easy. It's as tight as a miser. Lookin' around she spots a chair that ain't workin', and she has it to the door in no time. Then she climbs aboard and takes a sly slant through the transom. Once is enough for little V. Every member of the Bonafico gang is gathered over a table. They're all present but Perce, and all togged for the street and sportin' a grip or two, too. That means they're waitin' for the whistle.

So V reneges, ducks the chair, and drops ten stories back to where Romeo waits without. He nearly hops out of his skin when she gives the shover a dig and tells him to get pinched if he wants to, but make the Nth Street station in three minutes, regardless of cost. Perce tries to start an argument, but she informs him that her motto is: "If business interferes with pleasure, cut out the pleasure."

Anyhow the shover does as he's told, because he sees something about V that means: "I'm bossin' this party."

Before Perce knows whether he's comin' or goin', they're back at the Bonafico, and when V leads the way from the elevator, she's holdin' somethin' bright and shiny in her hand. And it ain't a hatpin!

She passes Perce the sign, and he begins

to register extreme silence. I'm thinkin' she's got him trained. Then she pussy-foots to the door of the main office with Perce a close second. They listen hard at the door and can hear the growl of a hot confab on the opposite side. And the way they're cooin' to each other sounds just like a machine-gun in full blast.

"That chair over there!" says V, and Perce comes to long enough to produce.

He sets it right and helps V up so she can do another peek-a-boo through the transom. Then, sudden like she ducks back and comes down and the talkin' stops, just like that. Perce hears a firm tread come close and the door flies open.

It's platter-face Donore, and that part of his anatomy is doin' a swell imitation of a snowman. And who wouldn't, with a gun pressed against their middle?

"Put up your hands," says V, quiet like.

"What's the joke?" gurgles Donore.

The rest of the Bonafico starts crowdin' around to hear the story.

"Get back there, you fellows," snaps V, *real* businesslike. "I'll tell you all when it's time to laugh."

Perce is just beginnin' to get a faint drift of the stunt and he starts to close the door. As he does, what shoots out of the elevator but a flyin'-squadron. About seven husky limbs of the law.

Donore flops into a chair, his face changin' from green to red and then back.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he groans.

And by the looks of the rest of 'em they all will.

"By the powers!" swears the captain, shakin' V's hand; "you got 'em at last, Miss Jones. String 'em together, boys." Perce wakes up out of a sound sleep.

"Miss Jones!" he hollers.

Venus stows away her cute gun and gives a puff of relief.

By the time they're all sportin' bracelets the cap sticks out his chest and turns to where Miss Jones ain't. Where is she?

Oh, she's beat it with Perce into *my* private office and I'm teachin' her to register joy.

The Killer

by J. U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith

Author of "Box 991," "Snared," "The Web of Destiny," "The Curse of Quetzol," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

CLAIRE DENHAM, the pretty librarian at the public library, is found murdered in the street, and Dr. John Gault, a young physician recently established in town, is arrested leaning over the body. This is the third similar murder within a short time, obviously all the work of the same homicidal maniac. Gault protests his innocence, and his fiancée, Myrtle Baldwin, daughter of the owner of the *Record*, stands by him. At her request her father retains the services of Gordon Glace and James Bryce, detectives, Glace being an ex-reporter of the paper. Gault claims that he was just leaving the house of a wealthy broker, Henry Stover, on whose wife he was calling professionally, when he stumbled over the body of the girl; but owing to the fact that she was killed with the metal cap from the gas-tank of the doctor's car and that there is a discrepancy of several minutes between the time he left Stover's and the time he was discovered beside the body, he is held for trial. Glace is summoned by Semi-Dual, the "Occult Detector," and while in consultation with him learns that Gault is to be taken to Professor Gilliam, an expert alienist, for examination. Gilliam, after an exhaustive examination, declares Gault absolutely sane. Later a woman turns up with the information that on the night of the murder she saw a man running away from the scene of the crime dressed in a long, black coat; that in passing her he pushed her, knocking her down, and disappeared. Glace goes to see her, and finds the mark of a bloody hand on her coat. Danny Quinn, Glace's office-boy, finds a broken piece of eye-glass at the scene of the murder. This looks bad for Gault, as his glasses are broken; but on taking them to an optician it is found that the piece could not have belonged to Gault's glasses.

Glace, accompanied by Jim Bryce and the regular detective who has charge of the case for the police, Johnson, go to see Dual, who gives each of them a special mission, and states that the case will be concluded and the real murderer arrested before eleven o'clock the next night. The next morning Glace is surprised to read in the paper of the arrest of the husband of the woman who volunteered her evidence and whose blood-stained coat he has.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SUMMONS FROM THE TOWER.

"HOLY smoke," I exclaimed as I nicked my chin, and put down my razor. "Johnson must be batty. What grounds has he for taking Madsen in?"

"Maybe the paper tells," said Connie.

"Quite likely," I agreed on the spot. "Suppose you see. I've cut myself again."

"Safety first," quoted Connie. "You ought to try one. Well, listen:

"Developments of the day and last evening were responsible for the drag-net being thrown

over the city last night, with a total result of twenty new arrests in the Denham murder. Of these, according to Captain of Detectives Johnson, who has this matter in charge, the most likely suspect is a plumber named Madsen, whose wife yesterday told the police a story of having been knocked off her feet in front of her own gate by a running man in a long, dark coat.

"When Madsen was arrested at his home last night, Mrs. Madsen declared he had left home early in the evening on the night of Claire Denham's murder, telling her he was going to attend a meeting of the Plumbers' Union to which he belongs. Under repeated questionings, she finally admitted that he did not return home until one o'clock in the morning. Inquiry of officers of the lodge show that he was not present at the meeting.

"A jacket belonging to Mrs. Madsen shows

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spots which react to the test for blood. Examination of these at the jail show them to have been apparently made by a larger hand than that of Dr. Gault, the young physician at first arrested for the murder on the site of the crime, but approximately the size of Madsen's fingers.

"It will be remembered that in the case of Bertha Kurtz, the second young woman slain in this city under suspicious circumstances, this winter, no instrument was found, although her head was crushed in a manner similar to that of Claire Denham's. Surgeon Bailey, of the department, says, however, that the weapon was undoubtedly a blunt object, such as a plumber's wrench or similar tool.

"Detective Johnson is working along a theory that Madsen may have been running toward his own home when he encountered his wife at their gate. She admitted yesterday that her husband had advised her to keep quiet about having been thrown down by the man she saw running from the direction of the crime. If a motive for the murder can be unearthed, suspicion may be shifted from Gault. In the mean time the department is actively at work."

Connie threw the paper aside.

"Actively at work," she sniffed. "I should say so, if they've arrested twenty new suspects since last night. I thought Dr. Gault had already been bound over for trial. What do they want with twenty new—"

"Hold on," I interrupted. "Johnson isn't as sure about Gault as he was. His theory isn't so bad on the face, although I think he's acted prematurely. I wonder if he found out where Madsen really was, or not?"

"Probably not," said Connie. "He wouldn't think that far ahead. Why don't you do it? I think Johnson needs help, and he evidently thinks that in numbers there is—a chance." She grinned. "Why don't you help Madsen, if nothing else. Most likely the man was playing poker or just getting innocently drunk. Men regard such things as having a good time, I believe."

"I'm going to have breakfast and go to the office," I declared without further comment on her remark.

Her eyes widened. "And then what?"

"Nothing. You remember I told Dual I wouldn't until he told me what to do."

I meant exactly what I said. I had waked with that determination in mind. I was going to follow literally what my agreement with Semi embraced. I no longer doubted that he would keep his promise in the fullest measure, as he had so often done in the past. Like Johnson's, my own efforts appeared only to muddle the pool of suspicion the more from hour to hour.

I was going to lie back and let its disturbed facts settle and its troubled depths grow clear.

"Oh!" Connie smiled in understanding. "'They also serve who only stand and wait.' Is that it, Gordon?"

"Suppose you see if the breakfast is waiting to be served," I said. And Connie laughed.

But I didn't get to the office till between nine and ten. My resolve to leave things in the capable hands of Dual resulted in my dallying somewhat over the morning meal, and when I went out I found the day one of brilliant sunshine after the rain.

Late in February as it was, the air held that first faint hint of spring with its promise of renewing life and hope, which sometimes whispers to tired hearts at the fag end of winter. It made me rather reluctant to shut myself up between the walls of my office and slowed my steps.

When I did arrive I found Dan busily engaged in bothering Miss Newell's work on her machine, by what I suspected was a more or less egotistical recital of his own endeavors of the day before. It died as I asked for the mail and went into my office to look it over. And then Bryce came in.

I looked out of my private room as I heard his voice.

"Oh, hello," he said. "What are you doing?"

I answered him as I had Connie: "Nothing."

He nodded in understanding. "Well, I went down to see Gault. Thought I might as well drop in an' see how he was feelin'. I found him all chirked up.

Reckon he wasn't as set on that girl's stayin' away as he let on. She went down there after she brought you back from Madsen's yesterday afternoon, an' filled his cell up with flowers an' magazines an' cigars an' cigarettes an' a pipe. Women sure are funny, ain't they?"

Miss Newell sniffed behind her machine. "Think so?" she took Jim to task. "You'd expect a wife to stand by her husband, I suppose?"

"Well," Jim gave me a wink, "a wife does owe a sort of duty to her natural master—"

Nellie shot him a glance. "If some girl did what you say, it's safe to suppose she loves him," she retorted with rising color. "I'm a girl, and I know. If she does, why shouldn't she stand by him just as much before marriage as after?"

"An' dat's authority speakin'," Dan, the irrepressible, broke in. "Nellie's a skirt, an' she knows. What fogs me is why she didn't slip 'im a bottle of grape juice 'long with th' rest."

Bryce grabbed him. "You're all set up, aren't you, kid?" he said, grinning. "That eye-glass biz has made you pretty chesty, eh?"

And Dan grinned back. "Anyway it puts a crimp into Johnson's latest pinch," he proclaimed.

"Eh?" Bryce sobered.

Dan nodded. "Sure. Madsen don't wear glasses. I know that geezer by sight. I bet he was out at a pickle party night 'fore last or sumpin'. That 'Bosch' Johnson never thought of that, I'll bet."

"Bosch?" I inquired.

"Squarehead," said Dan. "That's *parlez vous*."

Bryce released him with a shove. "I seen Johnson, too," he announced. "He's tryin' to find out where Madsen was that night right now. Madsen won't say a darned thing about it, an' Johnson hasn't got it as yet, though he has picked up a barkeep who says Tom stopped in his place just before he closed up an' bought a glass of beer. He says Madsen

was sober all right then, an' didn't look worried or a bit fussed up at all. Whad'ye suppose—"

Sharp, snapping, there came from my own room the buzz of that private phone which kept me in touch with Dual. I whirled from Jim's unfinished question and hurried to answer its summons as instinctively as a fire-horse leaps under the harness at the sound of an alarm.

Like the fire-horse, that staccato whir of the little signal spelled action to me, too. I caught the receiver and crushed it against my ear, and was conscious of a note of tension in my tones as I replied.

"Gordon," Semi's voice came to me softly, devoid of any excitement such as had tintured mine, "will you go over to Baldwin's and escort Miss Myrtle to me? I have had her on the wire, and she will expect you. Bring her to the garden without unnecessary delay."

Just that. He said it as casually as he might have asked me to drop in for an hour's conversation, and though a dozen eager questions leaped to my lips I crushed them back and assented without asking a single reason why he desired Gault's fiancée brought into his presence. Only two things did I say beyond agreement, and that was to mention Gilliam's acceptance and to inquire if he knew of Madsen's arrest.

"Johnson is at least energetic," was his comment. "Energy illy directed is apt to defeat its purpose. As I said, Miss Baldwin is waiting."

One could call that a hint or a shove. I delayed no longer about telling Bryce where I was going, and setting out. And because I was urged to haste I took a taxi and was whisked across to the Baldwin mansion, where I found the little coupé of the day before already standing in front of the door, and therefore dismissed my cab.

As though to confirm Semi-Dual's words, I never reached the doors myself, because as I began mounting the steps the portals of the house opened and the trim figure of Myrtle Baldwin appeared.

"Good morning," she said. "I was watching for your coming, and I'm dying to ask you almost a million questions about where you are to take me and who I am to see."

I uncovered. "Time and distance forbid the million, I'm afraid," I responded. "But I'll tell you what I can."

I smiled both at the picture of eager young life she made this sunny morning and at the subtle manner in which it appeared Dual had arranged for me to pave the way to his meeting with the girl. Out of his depths of human knowledge he knew she would ask and ask, and I would perforce answer, and so create at least a partial understanding in her mind for that garden, and the man she would find there, and so be less surprised, more ready for his tactful handling to whatever purpose was his.

Turning, I led the way back to the coupé and held open its door while she entered and took her place, ere I seated myself at her side.

"And now—" I prompted as she set us in motion.

"Who is this man—this friend of yours, as he says—who asked me to meet him?" She faced me directly for the moment.

"Semi-Dual?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Again I smiled, but not at her. I let her see the expression creep over my face, however, before I replied: "Do you remember what I told you last night—about the 'eleventh hour,' Miss Baldwin? If so, perhaps I can best answer your question by saying Dual is the man who made that prediction."

For a moment she said nothing; then: "But he *is* a friend of yours? He *is* helping you with John's case?"

I looked her full in the eye. "He is *running* the case at present, Miss Baldwin. Myself and my partner were getting nowhere. We appealed to him for help."

"But why—who is he?" she demanded and set her lips tight.

"He is the one man best qualified to

find out the real truth," I told her. "Time and again he has helped others in the past, as he now means to help you and Dr. Gault. Last night I agreed to place the entire affair in his hands and act under his direction. But before you meet him I want to tell you to be surprised at nothing you may see or hear, when you do. On the other hand, do not be alarmed or confused.

"Dual is the gentlest, the sweetest character of a man I have ever known. He has risen to a point where the lesser emotions and passions of our earth life leave his calm undisturbed. His main mission in life is to do good; his reward is in seeing good accomplished. His law is immutable justice—eternal right and good. To you at first he will seem strange—and later wonderful beyond expression, and above everything else he will appear strong."

I caught the sound of her more rapid breathing even above my words.

"Mr. Glace—is—is your friend a—*a* priest?" she asked.

I nodded. "A priest of right, Miss Baldwin." A man could say a thing like that to a girl or a woman, where to a man it would have appeared overdrawn or mawkish.

Her eyes were wide. "And—and he asked me to help him?" she said.

I started. "Help him?" I questioned. "How?"

"I don't know," she replied. "He didn't say. How could I help one such as you describe? I thought perhaps you could tell me."

I shook my head. "I did not even know what he had said to you this morning, Miss Baldwin. He merely told me to come over and bring you back with me."

She caught her breath. "Back where? Why, where am I to drive?"

She didn't know that. At least it showed the quality of the woman that she had started to an unknown destination with one she knew as slightly as myself, in order to do something for that other

man she loved. She was as brave as fair then.

"The Urania," I said.

"Your building? That's it just ahead," she exclaimed. "He is there?"

I nodded. It seemed to me there was a personal quality in the way she spoke of Dual as "he," as if already some subtle sympathy identified him to her. I sat silent from then on until she stopped the coupé.

And still in silence I helped her out and led her back to the cages, and stood beside her while we shot up in an express to the twentieth floor. But I noted her eyes take in the sweep of the marble stairs as we mounted, and widen in sudden wonder as we came out at its head and the garden spread before us, and the chimes rang sweet through the sunlighted air.

The green glass cover was up, and the whole place was full of a pale-amber quality which seemed actually to intensify the outer light. The bells of crocuses, purple and golden and white, seemed held from the borders of the paths to catch it in each chalice.

Beyond them the tower gleamed white. And from its door came a figure in trailing robes of white and purple, which advanced slowly and without the least haste, in our direction; a figure tall, commanding. I heard my companion catch her breath in sudden comprehension as her eyes fell on Semi-Dual.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLOOD-RED CHAMBER.

HE came down the path, while we stood and waited, and paused.

"Miss Baldwin," he said in his mellow accents, "I bid you welcome. I am the one who asked your help, in order to help not only another but others. That you come hither with my friend, Mr. Glace, is, I take it, an earnest of your readiness to render the help I request. To that end, will you accompany me to

the tower, in order that I may explain the form your aid must take?"

I don't know just what I expected. I am not sure I had formed any real conceptions as to the form Dual's actions would take. But his words amazed me. In all my knowledge of him he had never done a thing such as he suggested, and I could not comprehend.

My own words had, however, prepared the girl beside me for something beyond the ordinary routine and paved the way for Semi's very request, as I saw now. Without the least hesitation, so far as I could determine, she returned the regard Dual fixed upon her and answered: "I will come."

Dual smiled. The light of it flamed across his face. He put out a hand and, like one in a dream, Miss Baldwin placed in it her own.

Without another word Semi turned and led her along the path and quite to the tower. They passed together through its door.

I stood there in the grip of a total non-comprehension. After a bit I went over and dropped down on a bench, placed near the little old world sun dial which Dual had picked up Heaven knew where and installed here in his garden.

"*Eternal Justice, Eternal Right, Lie in the Hands of God, From Whom Comes Light,*" it proclaimed, according to his translation of the script which circled the outer rim. Heaven knew there was no light on the matter in hand in my mind just then as I sat there with my eyes still on the door of the tower. I felt wholly puzzled, wofully insignificant of purpose, shut out—as, indeed, I most literally was.

The girl who had followed Dual had mentioned some assistance he had said she could give in the affair of which he had taken charge. His own words to her had certainly confirmed her statement. What aid could she, frail bud of womanhood, bring to him? I questioned. Inscrutable always, he had never been more so than this morning, as it seemed to me.

I think there was a bit of pique mixed up in my consideration. I think I felt as any trusted lieutenant might who finds himself set aside and another called to a secret consultation by the one he has faithfully served. Unworthy? Possibly it was but human, I maintain. He had asked me to do nothing save by his direction, and the sum of that was to act as a squire of dames; to furnish escort to the fresh beauty of that girl who had given him her trust with her hand, urged to that step by my very words, as I could not help but feel.

And so I think all my perplexity really came to just the one fact that I couldn't understand why I should be shut out. If I had known, then I would have known the reason. Dual no doubt knew that, too, as he knew so many things. He would have known it just because he knew me so well. That, indeed, was the reason, as I was to learn in the weird ending of that terrible matter, of whose dreadful final chapter he was already aware—was planning, indeed, with the girl he had led with him up the path.

Yes, had I known the nature of the help he was asking, I am sure, despite all my faith, all my belief in him, I would have protested, and so, perhaps, have interfered with his great plan which finally wrought the very end he intended that it should. I had told Miss Baldwin he was above mere every-day emotion, and he was. It was that very thing which enabled him to work with that mathematical precision of cause and effect which characterized his methods. And it would have been those very emotions which would have made me cry out; chief among them a fear of a possible inability to check the forces set into operation ere they had gone too far.

But I didn't know, and I sat there and sulked beside the sun-dial, and watched the door, and wondered what might be passing beyond it, until Myrtle Baldwin appeared framed in its shadow, quite alone.

I sprang up and stood while she ap-

proached, and as she came nearer I felt my pulses quicken at her face. It was inspired, exalted, fired by a purpose of the spirit which shone through it, and seemed to give it a new light. Her eyes were wide, her lips smiling. She walked with chin raised, not seeming to look so much where she went as at something beyond, some prospect visible only to her own soul. I fancy it may have been with such an expression early martyrs faced the lions of the arena. Well, it wasn't so far different either in her case, only I didn't know it then, as I have said.

I actually think she would have passed me if I had not spoken her name. Then she turned toward me and smiled. Even her smile held an element of that exaltation I had seen as she approached.

"Mr. Glace," she cried softly, "you've been waiting! But of course! Mr. Dual asked me to send you to him."

"Dual did?" I questioned quickly. Then I wasn't forgotten. Oh, I was selfish enough to be glad.

"He is wonderful—wonderful!" said Miss Baldwin. "Such a mind—such a marvelous mind—such a spirit! I didn't know there were men like that."

"What did he say? How are you to help him?" I shouldn't have asked it, but I did.

She shook her head. "He said you might question," she told me almost in a tone of reproof. "He said I was not to answer, Mr. Glace."

It was always like that. Dual knew. He guarded every angle, every turn. He was not to be caught napping. "Come," I suggested, smarting a bit at the folly of my question. "I shall see you back to your car."

"Thank you, no. You are kind, but I can find the way. I see it clearly before me—the way."

It came over me that her words held a double meaning; something deeper than an assurance that she knew the road back to the street. I stepped back before the thing it spoke of and lifted my hat.

"You'll go to him?" she questioned.

"At once."

And suddenly she was herself. She put out her hand. "Thank you for all your trouble, all your help," she told me. "It is through you I am here; because he is your friend, and you laid my troubles before him. I am really very grateful. Good morning, Mr. Glace."

She turned away down the path. The chimes rang as she hurried across the plate. I felt as I watched that they were no sweeter than her, than any pure young girl at the dawn of life. I waited until the top of her modish hat was lost to view down the stairway, and then I, too, turned and went up the path to the tower and Dual.

Another surprise was waiting for me there. I crossed the outer room, and came to the inner to find it hugely changed. Its ordinary walls had vanished, concealed from view by long curtains of red velvet which depended from some unseen support high up near the ceiling. The great desk, too, was gone, and the accustomed chairs.

Even the golden globe of the light held by the huge bronze Venus had been replaced by a shade stained red. In the center of the floor stood a small ebony table, doubly black by contrast, and beside it Dual, clad no longer in his robe, but in a loose workman's blouse such as the peasantry of Europe are accustomed to wear, was working with some queer-looking boxes and wires.

"Come in, my *fides Achates*," he said, looking up with a smile. "Or perhaps I should call you, rather, my good Achilles, since you have been for some time inclined to sulk out there in the garden. My dear Gordon, what is past is past; what was done was done for a reason, as none than you should know better. And since it is past, suppose you sit down on one of my ebony chairs and tell me of your errand of last night."

Feeling a bit ashamed of my thoughts, to which he so plainly alluded, I did as he asked, noting that all the chairs in

the room were black, like the table beside which he worked. "I have Gilliam's note, as I told you," I announced, and produced it as I spoke.

Semi took it and ripped it open. He appeared very human, wholly unlike the man I knew him to be as he sat there cross-legged among his materials and clad in the blouse. Save for the wonderfully strong lines of his face, he might have been just a workman for the moment. While he read, I inspected the familiar room so vastly changed. "What's it all for?" I inquired, when sure he had reached the end.

"Stage settings; mechanical trickery; aids to an end," he replied.

"The end?" I cried, sitting forward. "The end, Dual?" Once before I had seen the climax of a case played out in these rooms, when the lights were changed; only then Dual had used purple for their color, and now he chose red—red walls, red lights. Here, then, was to be the ending place of the Denham affair; here it would be cleared before the eleventh hour. My eyes sought for the clock, and found it gone. And Dual, as though he fully read my intent:

"Behind the curtain. The room is somewhat smaller inside the curtains, as you may notice. Yes, Gordon, *the end*. What else?"

I looked him in the eye. "You know what I thought last night when I sat here, before you sent me with the note. You read my mind."

"Yes." He bent over a bit of wire he was fastening to one end of a small box.

"Well?"

He smiled slightly. "There are times, my friend, when your spirit leaps out into the void of conjecture, and arrives at strange conclusions, which would fail to appeal to the every-day man without proof. Proof. That is what mankind asks for; proof of this, proof of that, proof of his own spirit; proof of his God. Why, then, ask it to accept anything on faith alone when proof may be forthcoming. All these trappings and settings

are aimed at attaining that in the quickest possible way. And now your final report in the matter, if you will."

I told him everything I could remember of what Gilliam and I had discussed the previous evening. Unlike his usual custom, he worked to-day while he listened, joining wires, screwing them fast to the box and to the under side of the table, nodding now and then as I spoke. It came over me after a time that I was not so much informing as confirming things already known or suspected before I came. Yet I went on to the end, and having reached it, stopped just as Henri came in with his arms full of bundles and laid them down.

"Unwrap them," said Dual.

The man complied. He produced a good-sized globe of semitranslucent glass, a short, hollow metal standard equipped at its top with a ring such as one commonly sees on electric fixtures, made to hold the shades—a large metal cap something like a helmet in shape and a wig of brown, slightly waving hair and decided thickness.

I eyed them with considerable interest as he placed them on the table and withdrew back of the crimson curtains in the direction of the rear.

"The globe and the standard go together," Dual began. "The standard will be fixed on the table and the globe set on top of that, with a very small electric lamp of sufficient power merely to throw a dull glow through the glass set on a standard which will run up through the tube."

I started. "Why, that will make it something very much like the crystals the seers use, in appearance!" I exclaimed.

"Very much," said Dual.

I thought I began to see. Gilliam no doubt thought Semi something in the nature of an occult adept. He might well expect such trimmings as these Dual was installing. Semi meant to foster his conception, and, by and through what he called his mechanical aids, lead him to a point where he would break down his re-

straint and compel a confession. Something like a feeling of full comprehension gripped me.

"By the way," I said, "I left Gilliam's umbrella here last night."

Dual nodded. "I saw it. After tonight it may be returned to the professor, if he wishes. I shall mention the article to him while he is here."

Now, what was there about that to make me shiver? I don't know. Yet I did. I got up off the ebony chair. "Semi!" I cried. "Semi, what is it? What does it all mean? Who killed that girl? Does Gilliam know?"

Back of the blood-red curtains the great clock began striking, and it struck eleven. Dual waited until it was done. "Patience," he said. "Ere twelve more hours you shall know the answer. Gilliam does *not* know."

Gilliam does not know. My structure of suspicion came down with a crash. I stood there and stared. I looked around the red walls. Suddenly it grew upon me that their hanging folds, the black table in the center, were like the fittings of a chamber of execution. The thing rose up and caught at my breath, and stifled. I wanted to get out—into the garden—into the sunshine. I forced my eyes back to Semi. "What shall I do? What do you want me to do?" I made a full and final surrender.

He answered me with my own word in the morning. "Nothing. Save the last chapter, it is finished. Do what you please; go where you like. Return here with your partner Bryce not one moment later than nine."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARKING TIME.

JUST how to tell of that last episode I hardly know. Almost I hesitate to describe it as I saw it, and Bryce and Johnson, lest it seem to you as it did to me then, more like the distorted vagaries of some dreadful dream than an actual

happening of life. Yet I can close my eyes and call it back before my mental vision as plainly to-day as I saw it that night; everything which occurred in that red room from first to last—that pitiful, dreadful last—which saw Dual's promise fulfilled.

But that was hours later. I stood and gaped for a moment after his final answer, and he went on working. He was unlike himself, too, this morning. Everything was different; as different as the room had become. I know now, of course, why he did not wish to discuss the thing he intended, which must have been painful; more painful, even, to him, than to one less finely tuned to a full appreciation of all life proportions. But then I didn't know, so I stood there and watched him and said nothing, and after a bit I accepted the situation with a nod and went out, feeling almost a sense of chill in my soul because he would not argue or discuss, or explain as so often he had done in the past.

I came out into the garden and the sun, but paid them scant attention. Semi-Dual's words were still buzzing in my brain. "Gilliam does not know." Then in God's name who did? Like an answer from the vault of heaven came the thought that Dual did. Yes, he knew—he must—else why the elaborate preparations for something, he alone must understand.

I went back to the office and found Bryce still waiting about. "Well," he began, "did you get her?"

I nodded.

He eyed me closely. "What happened? What are we to do?" he inquired.

"Nothing." The word seemed to leap from my lips almost bitter. "We're to go where we please, do what we please, so long as we get up-stairs not later than nine."

His eyes popped. "But, Lord of Love, that only leaves two hours to close the matter up if he's going to arrive on his own time."

I felt tired, weary of hammering my fu-

tile thoughts against invisible walls of resistance.

"Perhaps that will be sufficient," I made an almost snappish rejoinder. "Anyway it's up to Semi—and Semi's a clam this morning. I'm going out."

"Where?" Jim made as though to rise to accompany me, I fancy.

"Anywhere — nowhere," I growled, turning away.

"Oh," said Bryce, and sank back in his chair. "You'll be back here."

"Naturally," I flung out of the door on the word.

Certainly it was childish. It gives me a flush now to record it. But I was fagged, mentally tired with the whole business. I was piqued, a bit jealous as I must confess still of that slip of a girl in her dark-blue dress and chic little hat, who had come from Semi's presence with a face inspired.

Dual must have explained to her, shown her the final answer; to her whom he had never seen until that morning, to her to whom he had accorded the rare privilege of a visit to that roof world where he held himself apart from all the world; where of all mankind I alone was privileged to go when I listed.

To her he must have explained while I still groped in a mental haze and found my one fancied belief shattered to bits by his positive assertion that despite all seeming, Gilliam did not know who the murderer of the night streets was. Of her he had asked assistance, while I burned to assist. Oh, I was in a pretty pickle as I took a car and had myself dropped down to the level of the street.

It was something of all that sent me to Smithson, I suppose. Anyway, I swung off to the *Record* building and mounted the stairs, flung in through the local room, I had once known so well, and tapped on the old man's door.

"Huh!" That was his voice.

I opened the door and went in. He sat by his desk, in a jungle of papers. He glanced up. "Oh," he greeted, "are you still alive?"

"No," I said, "I'm a dead one," and sat down.

"Flowers?" Smithson grinned in his crooked lip-twisting way.

"Nothing," I said morosely.

He eyed me. "What's hipped you, son?" he inquired, as he picked up a battered pipe and filled it. "Struck a split switch in that schedule of events or what?"

"If I knew I'd tell you," I growled out. "I don't know a thing about that schedule myself. Dual's crawled into a hole and the hole has vanished. He's setting the stage for something, I don't know what. What about this Madsen pinch?"

"Oh, that," said Smithson with a sniff. "Too much Johnson, that's all. Madsen was out on a little extra job of his own; little side money after hours, for a friend, you know. He wouldn't cheep because he knew he'd get Jessie from his union if they found him scabbing. But the other fellow did. Madsen's loose. We won't give him away, either; just say the evidence fell down."

He paused and puffed on his pipe. "See here," he went on after a bit. "You know this Dual a lot better than I do, I guess. You ought to, since I never met him but once. But that once made me think him about the whitest thing inside a man's hide I ever encountered. He isn't a man—he's got something on just man if you know what I mean. I've never been able to just figure out how he happened."

"Now you say he's froze up about this and you're all up in the air. It occurs to me that if you know him as well as you say you do, you ought to know he wouldn't do that unless he had a blamed good reason. Son, you're acting a good bit like a kid. You want to remember a lot depends on this besides your satisfaction. Little things like a man's liberty and good name, and a good girl's happiness, and the lives of the Lord knows how many women who haven't met whatever it is that runs loose in this town this winter. Come out of it, Glace."

It was the longest speech I had ever heard Smithson make, and it brought the blood to my cheek. Smithson knew how to put the punch into English when he wanted. It came over me in a flood that he had said not one word but was right. I was acting like a cad, like a sulky schoolboy. Smithson killed the mood.

All I had ever known of Semi surged back through my mind, and with it the expression of his face, the tenor of his words this morning. As on the evening before, they had held a foundation of sadness, as though his great soul grieved while his strong mind acted. I lifted my eyes to my old boss. "You're right," I said. "That's past."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "And now what's happened?"

I told him as nearly as I could.

"Holy mackerel!" he exploded at the end. "I don't wonder you're pickin' th' covers an' talkin' to yourself. An' you're laid off till nine." Abruptly he grinned. "Gordon, you keep that date. There'll be something doing. When it comes off get it in here if you burn up the wire." Once more he was city editor of the *Record*, and all newspaper man.

I laughed. I felt better. "I'll do it," I promised. "Only I guess you can see how much like a detective I feel this morning."

Smithson grinned. "Yep. You must feel just about like Johnson. But—oh, rats! The only man I ever knew who went crook huntin' in th' stars is this 'Occult Detector.' It's askin' a little too much of the average man. But do you know what I think? I think you've all missed it by not hunting up those numbers Claire said just before she died."

"You mean that seventy-nine—eighty-three?" I returned.

"Sure." He nodded. "They meant something. I've an idea Dual's beat you all to it and found out what they meant. I've a notion they were important. Why didn't you look them up?"

"Look them up?" I cried. "We tried. Bryce thought they might mean a book,

but they didn't. Dual said so. Every last thing we've tried to look up went to pieces as fast as we ran it out. Those glasses Dan found might have meant a great deal, but they didn't; so might the blood spots, if one could find who made them. It rains and washes out any foot-prints or marks we might have found. The whole thing's a muddle from first to last."

"Oh, I don't know," said Smithson. "I'm bettin' on Dual."

I looked him in the eye. "So am I," I declared from a sudden impulse, and knew I meant each word. My talk with Smithson had swept out of my mind the clouds of personal chagrin and given me back my poise.

It was one o'clock. I left Smithson and hunted up a café for some lunch. After that I went back to the office and plunged into several minor matters which demanded my attention. So far as I could I now, from deliberate purpose, put the whole matter of that evening out of my mind. Bryce was out, but came in about four o'clock. I made an appointment to meet him at the office at about eight thirty, and just before six I went out home. During dinner I told Connie all which had transpired and left her on the verge of hysterical excitement when I set out to meet Bryce.

I found Johnson there before me, too. "Hello!" I remarked, "what brings you?"

He grinned. "I guess you know more about it than I do," he grumbled. "I ain't feelin' so chesty as I did yesterday mornin'. This thing's got us all goin' down to the office."

"If you don't know more than we do you don't know much," I said. "Last night I laid down and turned the whole thing over to Dual."

"I doped that out right then at any rate," he rejoined. "As to my bein' here, if you got a phone call that if you'd come up here to-night about this time, the feller what did for that girl would be put in your hands, you'd come, I guess, hey?"

"Oh," I said. "You got something like that then."

"Yes, I did," he declared. "That's why I'm here. Th' party said I was to meet you boys an' go wherever you took me. Where do we go?"

I didn't answer. I lifted a hand and pointed straight at the ceiling.

But Johnson understood. He nodded. "I thought so. There wasn't nothing else to think when I knew he was in this with you. Well, when do we go?"

I looked at my watch. It was five minutes to nine. "Now," I replied.

That was how we approached the final stage of the triple murders. If I had needed any last earnest of Dual's certainty as to the result the presence of Johnson would have provided it beyond any question. That he should have directed the detective to join us, showed only how clearly he himself foresaw what was to happen.

The events which followed were but one more proof of his total justification in maintaining the silence he had. I doubt whether it could possibly have been brought about had we known in advance, and Semi, adept in human nature that he was, knew that as well as he knew the necessity for the thing he intended.

We went up and through the garden and into the tower, where the ante-room was now lighted. Dual himself met us, contrary to his usual custom. And once more he was garbed in a different fashion from any I had seen him adopt. From his neck to his heels his figure was draped in a long, dark robe unrelieved by any touch of color. His head was covered by a jet-black turban, into the front of which was caught that huge, blood-red ruby I had three times before seen him wear. It gleamed there a great glowing blotch of crimson above his forehead as its facets caught the light.

"You come in good time," he said, as he led us through the antechamber and on into the room of red. To-night it seemed even more crimson, more balefully ruddy than during the morning, when

I found it being prepared. Now it was a great red walled rectangle in the exact center of which was placed the ebony table flanked by two great chairs of equal blackness. Smaller chairs of similar nature were ranged around it.

On the table the great globe of opalescent glass was mounted on the standard I had seen, and glowed dully with the contained light, until it might seem a huge pink pearl to the active imagination. The light in the hands of the Venus glared more like a living heart, a gout of gore than anything else as I glimpsed it. The only relief from the two contrasting colors in fact was the pink white of the globe over the table, and a huge zodiacal chart hung against one side of the long crimson curtains, which fell from ceiling to floor.

And Dual himself helped out the *beautiful* color scheme in his somber raiment. All he needed, I fancied, was a mask with eye-holes to look the part of high executioner in the midst of his domain.

I saw Bryce sweep the apartment with widening eyes. I caught Johnson staring. On him it came as a shock, since the last time he had been here on the evening before the place had been a far different apartment to this draped hall of baleful red into which he now was brought. And despite the red glow from lamps and walls it seemed to me that some of the color ebbed away from his heavy cheeks.

Dual spoke again. "You will please be seated. Professor Gilliam, with whom I have an appointment, will soon be here. During what will transpire I will ask you gentlemen to maintain silence, to refrain from action or speech, no matter what you may see or hear, with the full understanding that all which may occur is aimed solely toward the solution of the Claire Denham case and those two others which have occurred this winter in the city. The means which I am about to adopt, while unusual, spectacular, perhaps, offer the quickest possible means of proving beyond question what that solution is. If addressed you will answer, otherwise not. Do you agree?"

Johnson tried to carry it off in easy fashion. "Sounds like th' questions they ask you before you join a lodge," he responded. "Last time I did anything like that th' answer was 'I do.' That goes."

Dual turned his glance to Jim, and he nodded.

My answer was a smile, which I hoped would say to Semi that I understood all and was sorry for my behavior of the morning. And I think it did, for his eyes glowed the least bit as they met mine, and his own lips seemed to echo faintly the smile upon my own. "It is understood, then," he said. "Be sure to keep your promise. On that success may depend."

Faint, sweet, the chimes rang out, setting the air of the red room a quiver as he ceased.

His eyes leaped back to me. "Gordon, that should be the professor. Will you go out and bring him back to me?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CRYSTAL GLOBE.

I ROSE and crossed quickly. From the anteroom door I descried a dark figure advancing up the path. It was angular, tall, draped in black raincoat, and carried a package in its hand. As I left home that evening I had noted a paleness of the stars, and now even as I glimpsed the man who approached I saw above him through the roof of the garden that the sky was overcast, the stars blotted out.

I stood and waited until the figure came full to the door of the tower. It was Gilliam beyond mistake. He lifted his head and saw me.

"Ah—Mr. Glace," he said in greeting. "You here? Are you to share our consideration? That is an agreeable surprise."

"Not only myself, but my partner, Mr. Bryce, and Detective Johnson," I informed him. "I came out to meet you when we heard the chimes."

"It will be quite a party." He smiled

slightly. "Novel door-bell, those chimes, quite in keeping with what you have told me of Mr. Dual." He held out the package. "You see, I have brought the book."

I nodded. It had come over me that I had not seen Henri, and that here was I doing his work. The question flitted through my mind as to just where Semi's man might be. Then I told the professor to put off his coat and hat, which I laid on a chair with those of us others and led him without any warning into the red draped room.

He blinked his eyes slightly at the transition of light, as I led him to Dual. Just what he thought as he stood there and listened to Semi's reply to my introduction, I can never know, but he replied as a gentleman should, and I slid back to my ebony chair against a curtain.

"I think," said Semi, "that Mr. Johnson you know. The other gentleman present is Mr. Bryce, business partner of my good friend, Glace, who brought you in."

Gilliam bowed.

"Pleased to meet you," said Jim, half rising and sinking back like a man on a spring, so quickly was it done.

"If you will be seated," Semi invited, waving a hand to the chair facing his own across the table where glowed the pink, pale body of the globe. "I perceive you have brought with you the book I requested. If you will pardon me a moment." He put out a hand.

Gilliam gave him the book. Dual placed it before him on the table close to what looked something like a policeman's billy—a short, dark club of mahogany or walnut, and spread it open. For a moment he seemed rather to play with its covers and pages than actually to inspect them, then closed it and pushed it aside.

"Professor Gilliam," he said, "I suppose you are perfectly aware, from my note, of the reason for my asking for this meeting, but before proceeding with the attempt to clear away the cloud which shrouds the death of three young women during the past winter, we should, per-

haps, discuss briefly the elements of those phenomena which will be called into play. Your work in metaphysics has doubtless been more along the occidental psychology, the study and observation and explanation of mind activity as generally understood. Mine, while it has embraced that, has also dealt with the higher manifestations of mental force as well—such things as are more commonly described as psychic. One of the tenets of the psychic philosophy is that no knowledge is really hidden from the subliminal self. You follow me, I hope?"

Gilliam bowed. "Indeed, yes. I have even attempted to enter the borderland of such subjects myself, Mr. Dual."

"The subliminal self—the subconscious mind—is held to know everything or be able to learn anything which is desired, by a process of mental concentration, a suppression of the objective faculties, and an elevation for the time being of the subconscious plane to that of the objective," Dual went on. "It is of that fact that the so-called seer makes use when he gazes into the crystal. There is in the crystal nothing of psychic power. A stone would do as well, save that the transparent or translucent quality of the crystal offers a more passive resistance to the sight.

"Such passive resistance which allows a slight penetration while it presents a barrier no less efficient, is the most effective in the world. But the crystal is but an object upon which the eye concentrates its attention, until becoming tired, its objective power is lulled to sleep and the subjective sight is thereby given full scope, and inverted to perceive the pictures wrought in the subliminal mind under the impulse of the conscious wish for knowledge. The crystal, therefore, is but a means to an end."

"Exactly," Gilliam assented with a mild enthusiasm showing in his tones. "Mr. Dual, you have stated the matter more clearly than any one I have ever met. Your words are an evidence of the sincerity of your professions. I shall be

delighted to join you in any experiment you may suggest."

"The experiment I have in mind," Dual resumed, "is along the lines I have shadowed in my remarks. In lieu of the crystal I have arranged the globe between us. It is mere glass, surrounding a small central light. As we agree upon the function of the crystal, we should find the illuminated globe as effective for our purpose. What I suggest is this. You and I will gaze into this globe. You shall question your subliminal mind as to the real cause, the real perpetrator of these past deaths. You shall tell me anything you see. I shall likewise speak to you, what I have in my mind. So we shall arrive at the proper solution and bring this peril to an end."

Right at the last there crept into his tones a note which made them vibrate a declaration rather than a suggestion. Or so it seemed to me, strung to the pitch I was.

But Gilliam, if he noted, made no comment. "These others present?" he questioned. "My understanding was that such experiments must, for success, be gone through without any chance of distraction or diversion."

"They are in sympathy with the experiment," said Semi. "Gentlemen, bring your chairs and place them in a semi-circle about the near end of the table. You will gaze into the globe and ask yourselves the same question proposed by me just now. Your added mental forces will so not come into conflict with ours."

I rose. So did Johnson and Bryce. We took our chairs and placed them as Dual had directed. Then we sat down. This was the climax. I felt somehow, some way, out of it. Semi, by his subtle control, was going to drag the answer to the question, as he said. But how? How could two polished men, two highly educated men, learn anything at all by sitting on two sides of a table and staring at an opalescent lamp-shade?

Yet it thrilled me, some way, even as the red hangings and lights had thrilled

me. I think it appealed to the primitive something in every breast which always must respond to the unusual or unknown as the child fears the dark, the unformed soul the future. Something portended, and I knew not what, and found my breath slowed, my chest heavy above it, a dull throb in my throat, which was the pound of my sense-clogged heart.

Dual shifted slightly in his seat. Softly there stole through the room a pulse of music, faint, far away, like the throbbing of fairy drums, the pulsing of fairy pipes, faint, shrill eery. I knew what it was, for I had heard it before. It was the voice of that strange instrument he had constructed—a thing which played by the force of etheric vibration—which he called the universalion, because it operated by the very power of the whirl of the earth through interstellar space.

I sat and listened while its voice grew gradually louder, yet not too loud, and took on a note which seemed to me some way to blend with the dark suggestions of the red walls and black chairs there in the room—to stimulate some way the lower passions and incite to deeds of physical horror, like the beat of a tom-tom at some aboriginal orgy.

Gilliam seemed somewhat surprised at the new element interjected into the proceedings, and Semi spoke:

"Music may aid certain forms of concentration. We are ready for the endeavor. Let him with knowledge speak first."

After that nothing. Dual and Gilliam sat watching the glowing globe. I sensed, rather than saw out of the tail of my eye, Bryce and Johnson staring at the pale thing, with faces screwed into scowls of what no doubt they thought was deep concentration.

The music went on and on, with a monotony of repetition primitive in its every cadence. What was there about it which made one think of murder and rapine, savage joy and no less bestial rage? The red air of the red room quivered with it. It was growing beyond en-

durance. I felt my scalp contract till it seemed each separate hair was erecting like the ruff of a dog when he growls at something in the night our mortal eyes cannot see. A mutter of thunder ran through the room; a dash of rain on a concealed pane.

I caught myself with a start. Dual had risen to his feet without taking his eyes off the globe. His lips opened. He began to speak:

"There was a house in a city. There was a man and a woman. The man was large, strong; a student of men and of minds. The woman was beautiful—beautiful in all ways, of face and body and soul. She was the mate of the man, and they were happy. While he studied and taught others, she kept his home and made of it a shrine of mutual love, to which he returned with a smile. See! He comes home in the evening, and she meets him with a smile on lips and eyes. They are blue, her eyes. Her hair is brown, slightly waving, heavy. You see it? The way I describe?"

Across the table Gilliam nodded slightly. "Yes—it's—it's in the globe. You're—you're helping me to see it."

Helping him to see it! I caught at the word. Of all the strange elements of this strange case, none seemed more strange than this present performance. What was Dual helping Gilliam to see? Of what bearing on the mystery of the deaths during the winter were these pictures of the home-life and love of an unknown man and woman? Into my mind there flashed a recollection of my conversation with the professor concerning the hypnotic treatment of personality dissociations. In God's name, what was Dual doing? Was he helping Gilliam, or *making* him see the things he described? I set my eyes upon him as he resumed:

"There was love in that home—great love. There was nothing to mar it, and nothing ever did. Is not that right?"

And Gilliam bowed. "Yes," he said in a whisper. "Oh, yes—quite. I—I see a great love."

"The man worshiped the woman," Semi went on in a dull monotone of description. "There was happiness and love until death came between. Watch in the globe. We shall see how death came—between. See. It is evening. The woman walks in the grounds surrounding her home. It is a Southern twilight—soft, calm, peaceful. The man sits on the porch of his home with a book. Suddenly the woman cries aloud. She tears at her hair so that it falls all about her shoulders. Turning, she runs toward the porch and her husband, crying to him for help.

"He springs up, and as he comprehends her terrified words he lifts the book and strikes at the side of her head. She stands at the top of the steps leading up from the ground to the porch, and he strikes at the side of her head where her hair is all falling down. The blow of the volume falls; swaying with fright, the woman loses her balance. She falls backward and to one side. Her head strikes the stones of the walk at the foot of the steps. They crush her head.

"The man leaps down after; he bends above her. She is dead—dead. And there in her hair is the cause of her death—the thing which drove her in terror to it. Watch—in the globe—we will see what it was. Just—a—" I saw his finger slip beneath the edge of the table, and then—inside the globe there leaped into sudden being the wide-winged shadow of a *bat!*

That was all; but as it flashed there darkly, as he saw it appear on the opalescent glass, a swift and terrible change came over the man who watched. You who have read the story of *Dr. Jekyll* and *Mr. Hyde* will remember the masterly description of the transition in that masterpiece of fiction. The change in Gilliam was decidedly like that.

His neck drew down till it seemed to shorten. His shoulders came up. His back bowed. His angular features twitched and writhed into a new expression hideous to behold. His lips drew

back, became snarling. His wide ears seemed actually to prick. His arms came up, half bent; the fingers of his hands spread wide and half flexed, in the semblance of bony claws. And out of his throat there burst an inarticulate cry, which growled and rumbled and gurgled until it burst forth hoarsely into words: "The bat! The bat!"

"The bat," said Semi-Dual, "the cause of the death of the woman. *Behold!*"

The lights went out. Without sound, there appeared at the far end of the room, as we faced, a high, rectangular panel of light. And in it was a figure—the figure of a woman clad all in white, her head crowned by a mass of brown, waving hair. My heart came up and throbbed, as it seemed, in my throat. I knew her. It was Myrtle Baldwin framed there between the red curtains!

Once more that animal cry tore its way from Gilliam's throat. He sprang up. In the light from the panel where the girl stood, I saw him clutch at the club which had lain on the table. His clawing fingers closed about it. He sprang forward, crouching like some huge, distorted ape toward the woman. And then he was upon her. His arm came up. It fell; there was the sound of a blow.

The light of the panel faded out, also. Darkness came down—darkness absolute and complete, out of which drifted a sobbing snuffle, like the voice of a beast when it worries its prey.

A chair overturned with a crash. "Lights!" That was Johnson bellowing hoarsely. "Lights, you damned fools! Lights!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

"ENOUGH. It is finished." Semi's voice in the darkness. A ray of white light cutting the shadows. That I knew was an electric torch

in Johnson's hands, searching, searching to fall with its finger of light on the form of Dual bending above the still kneeling professor.

The lights came on with a glare. Henri shot between the curtains which had framed the panel where Myrtle stood and sprang to Gilliam's other side.

Beyond him I saw the girl, erect, white in her gown, her lips parted, her bosom panting, her brows drawn into a pucker over wide eyes, clasping a wig of thick, brown hair to her breast. On the floor the club with which she had been struck lay shattered into fragments, each of which showed faces and edges of white.

"It is finished—quite finished," said Semi again. "Come, Gilliam—come."

Between Dual and Henri the professor came slowly to his feet; led in their holding, he passed through the red curtains and vanished from our sight. He walked like one in his sleep, with a drag in his steps, seemingly unknowing where he went.

"What—what—" mouthed Johnson, throwing himself on his knees beside the shattered bits of the club.

I leaped toward Myrtle. Oh, now I understood all the strength of her spirit, all the devotion of her love. And I understood the nature of that assistance Dual had asked—which could not come from any other possible source—which only she could give. "Did he hurt you?" I cried. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No—oh, no—see!" From the wig she drew the metal helmet or cap I had seen Henri unwrap that morning. "This was over my hair, beneath the wig. It broke the blow—"

"Plaster!" shouted Johnson. "Th' club was made of plaster! Look here—was all this play actin', or what?"

Miss Baldwin shook her head. "It was not play acting, Mr. Johnson. It was real—oh, dreadfully real!" Abruptly her lips began to quiver. She buried her face in the thick hair of the wig and sobbed.

"Pitifully real," said Semi-Dual. He had stepped back through the red hangings. Once more he wore his robes of purple and white. He crossed the room and removed the chart from the wall, went on to the panel in the curtains, and laid hold of cords. The draperies slid back to the four corners of a rectangle of thin wires, to hang like huge, scarlet pillars. Behind them the clock showed in a corner, its hands at half after ten. The huge desk was against the opposite wall. The familiar chairs were ranged about the four sides of the apartment. Dual removed the red glass cover from the golden lamp of Venus. The glowing apple shone forth.

"Your prisoner is safe, with my man to guard him in a room from which, though alone, he could not escape," Semi spoke to Johnson. "It will be some time before he returns to his normal state of mind."

"Prisoner?" Johnson repeated.

"Professor Gilliam," said Dual.

"You mean—that is, you—mean he killed them girls?"

"As he attempted Miss Baldwin's life." Dual came over to the ebony table and sank into the ebony chair. "By a strange fatality Professor Gilliam, in his interview for the papers, diagnosed correctly his own case."

"About periodical mania," said Johnson. "You mean this stunt here with Miss Baldwin an' plaster sticks to prove he's dippy, an' was when he did the killin'?"

Dual shook his head. "By no means. I mean it to show you exactly how the phenomena occurs, and that it can and does under certain conditions. There is substantiating proof as well."

"What?" Johnson demanded. "I don't say you ain't right. It looks like you were; but what's your proof?"

"Suppose you all sit down while I produce it," said Semi.

We took seats.

"The first point," Dual began, "is the numbers 'seventy-nine, eighty-three'

spoken by Claire Denham just before she died. To my mind, they were meant to indicate the one who struck her—one whom she recognized and was unable to name, yet hoped to refer to in such a manner as would lead to his identification. It is possible that the name association cells in her brain were paralyzed by the blow which killed her, leaving the number cells still intact.

"Mr. Bryce made a suggestion that the numbers might refer to a book. Investigation showed they did not. But from that it was but a step to the supposition that they might be the file number of some subscriber's card. That supposition proved correct. Here"—he opened the volume Gilliam had brought with him—"is a book the professor drew from the library at six o'clock on the evening of the day Claire Denham was slain. Here, also, in its pocket, inside the cover, is the professor's card with his name and his number. That number is seven thousand nine hundred and eighty-three!"

Fool! The thought flashed in my brain. What stupidity not to have seen the simple alternative explanation of the dead girl's words. And as always, Semi-Dual had sensed it, seized upon it, made it the key to unlock the secret of her death. He was speaking of it still:

"It was the dying message of her soul to the world she was leaving, and because of her poor crushed brain she gave it a scanning enunciation, so that, instead of the whole connected number, she said it seventy-nine, eighty-three."

"Good Lord!" gasped Bryce. "What d'ye know about that?"

"A second point was that of the glasses which Mr. Glace's office-boy discovered on the scene of the crime. Their refraction was for a far-sighted eye, contrary to all expectation that they would incriminate Dr. Gault, whose eye is myopic. In fact, investigation showed that the doctor has never had a lens ground in the city. Once more, however, a further investigation shows not only that Professor Gilliam has had lenses

ground, but that the refraction of the bit of glass picked up by Dan Quinn corresponds with that of his glass prescription; and further still, that yesterday morning, after the death of Miss Denham, he sent a pair of glasses to a local optician for the purpose of having one of the lenses replaced."

"He did!" Johnson was leaning forward as he spoke.

"Indeed, yes. My own man obtained that information this morning. With that much to go on, we may now approach other elements of the case. You remember that you brought a coat here last night, Mr. Johnson, and that I tested its spots for blood. I have made one other blood test since then. In the case of the second woman murdered, there was no weapon found, as I recall the records. But—last night, my friend Glace brought here with the jacket I examined for you an umbrella loaned him that day by Professor Gilliam himself. When I sent him forth from this office on an errand of my own, I purposely caused him to forget that umbrella, so that it remained. I sent him from me in a half-dazed condition, and after he had gone, and Mr. Bryce had left, I examined that umbrella closely. Its head was a heavy knob of silver, below which was an engraved silver band. And—beneath that band was a dried substance, which, when tested, reacted in the same manner as the spots on the coat. It was blood."

I looked into his eyes. "It was fate, I think," I said.

He nodded. "Fate, yes—the fate of that unfortunate soul which to-night we have tested—the fate which I told you must come upon him and bring him within restraint—that fate which from the first I found foretold in the stars."

Once more his tone changed. "Let us now take up the more abstruse, though no less important, consideration of the matter. After the examination of Dr. Gault, Mr. Glace told me of his observations at the professor's home and of the verdict. They served to shed additional

light when considered in their place. That Gilliam pronounced the physician sane proved that he did not desire to put blame on an innocent man, even though a possible opportunity presented. Correlatively that would indicate that, even though guilty, Gilliam himself was unaware of the fact. Yet in his remarks for publication he had admitted that such a condition could exist, and the person deranged be wholly unaware of aught save a mental blank upon recovering from the periodical seizure.

"In addition to that, Mr. Glace mentioned a box of the *fer de lance* serpents in the room where the examination was held; also that Gilliam admitted experimenting with their venom and spoke of poor success. The *fer de lance* is used mainly in the attempted treatment of incipient or suspected mental derangements, rather than in epilepsy or affection of that nature.

"Presupposing the professor the real agent of the crimes, we might go a step further and assume that he was at least aware of the fact that he had mental lapses, and that the subject of his experiments with venine was himself. To support that was Mr. Glace's statement that when looking at a certain portrait of a beautiful woman which stood on his desk the man fell into periods of abstraction. You perhaps begin to see?"

"Oh, yes, I see—now," Johnson grunted. "Go ahead."

"Gilliam stated to Mr. Glace that he had held a chair in a certain Southern educational institution before coming here. I telegraphed the local authorities there and learned the details of his wife's death, which you heard me narrate to him a little while ago.

"She was in reality driven to her death by a bat. She ran to him as I portrayed. He struck at the bat with a book. In her terror, and not understanding, she dodged, lost her balance, and fell down some steps, fracturing her skull.

"At the time Gilliam appeared to take her death even coldly, and although no

suspicion ever attached to him of any sort whatever, he left very shortly after for the North. What was taken then for an objectionable coldness upon his part was in reality the beginning of the mental changes which climaxed in his periodical attacks of aberration.

“Certain cell groups paralyzed by the shock of the tragedy in his life never regained a normal function. We have, as you see, the causal incident, the resulting cell depression, the formation of suppressed emotion centers, which under certain other causal conditions will discharge.

“In this case, apparently the latter may be found in his periods of melancholic meditation before the picture of his wife. To quote Mr. Glace again, the man lived much alone. Doubtless he sat and brooded. The picture became in that case the means of concentration, as the globe did to-night. His own recollection of the incident supplied the suggestion my words provided this evening. Together the two brought about the change.”

“That’s all very well,” said Johnson, “but how about that gas-tank cap? How’d he get it and kill that girl right by the machine, without her making any fuss to be heard?”

“I am coming to that in a moment,” Dual replied. “You witnessed the change in him this evening. That would have lasted but briefly under usual conditions. Thereafter he would have approached nearer to his normal appearance, and with the cunning of the deranged person would have simulated it further at need.

“That he had cunning is shown by the fact that if we are to believe him unaware of his guilt, as I most certainly do, he cleansed the umbrella after using it to slay Bertha Kurtz, thereby removing the traces of her blood to arouse any suspicion even in his own balanced mind.

“Save that some of the blood worked under the name-plate on the handle, there would have been no evidence there. I would predicate even that upon

returning from his periodical condition to normal he was conscious of nothing save a mental lapse.

“He may even have come to himself to find himself still in his chair, and have fancied he had slept for an hour or hours as the case happened to be. Personally, however, I believe he knew more than that of the condition because of the presence of the snakes.

“Now to be more specific. My theory of Claire Denham’s death is this:

“Gilliam met her in front of the Stover house. Remember he knew her and she him, through his trips to the library for books. Perhaps she spoke. There followed a conversation. And all the time he spoke like himself, his crafty, distorted brain was seeking a means to express its overcharged cells and reproduce as near as it could the scene of horror which was the cause of their condition.

“Little by little, no doubt, he drew back toward the physician’s machine. While he still conversed his hand went out and rested upon it. It worked at the top of the tank, and finally had it loose. And then he struck, struck, so that the girl dropped at his feet. He bent above her and stained his hands in her blood. And at that moment Dr. Gault, coming out of Stover’s, interrupted.

“Gilliam fled down the street, collided with Mrs. Madsen, and thrust her out of his way, so marking her coat. After that he returned home and, having relieved the suppressed centers of their terrible charge, became once more himself.”

“Well, you’d have thought he’d ’a’ been jerry when he found the blood on his fist?” Johnson made comment.

“What if he washed his hands first?” Dual suggested. “I told you he would be inspired with cunning. To him, remember, his normal self would for the time being be as much another person as any stranger, as much to be feared, as much to be guarded against.”

Johnson nodded slowly. “I ain’t

exactly hep to that sort of stuff," he said.

"And so," Semi once more resumed, "having formed such a conception of the matter, I planned to show that it was. I reversed the process of those who treat personality changes by hypnotic suggestion, and instead of crushing the abnormal under a blanket of suggestion I decided to elevate it for the time to the objective and active plane.

"To that end I asked Miss Baldwin to assist me. Very bravely she agreed. I arranged this scene as you saw, in which she was to be the woman, and I procured the metal cap to fit her hair, and the wig to conceal it, and I had a bit of plaster molded into the semblance of a club and stained, that Gilliam might find an instrument ready to his hand at the proper moment, yet one which would shiver into fragments when it fell against the cap beneath the wig.

"You have witnessed the result—it removes all taint of suspicion from about Dr. Gault. It removes the peril which has walked abroad, unsuspected, in our city; it places under restraint that soul of misfortune who was the unwitting agent of these women's death, and thereby, as I think, fulfils the purpose of that message—that karmic command—from lip of the grave, contained in the faltered numbers, '79-83.'"

"But," Bryce broke into the tense pause which followed those final words, "I thought you said he had red hair."

Dual's eyes turned upon him. "I said that his color was red, that he partook of red in his material parts, Mr. Bryce. To that end, I draped my room in red, and set over my lights shades of a color which incites to thoughts and deeds of physical violence and passion. The given name Rufus, which, as you know, is the professor's, means partaking of the quality of red.

"Although graying now, had you noted closely you would have observed that his hair was once of a reddish-brown, almost the shade of the fur of

that dread creature of his aberrations, that thing which drives him to frenzy—the bat.

"To-night you witnessed the effect it had upon him, when I flashed its shadowed semblance inside the globe, by means of a spectroscope, concealed beneath the table and focused through the hollow tube of the standard.

"And I would not place it beyond the possible bounds that at such times as to-night the bat actually enters into his obsessions and he fancies himself something in the nature of a vampire, and kills as the storied vampire killed, to support its vicarious life."

"My God!" Bryce gasped.

"A vampire!" I cried.

Myrtle Baldwin sobbed again harshly. Her shoulders lifted and she shuddered.

Johnson shifted. "Well, this lets Gault out, anyway," he suggested. "When do I take him away, Mr. Dual? Have you got a phone? I'll call the wagon, an'—"

Semi-Dual lifted a hand. "Not yet, Mr. Johnson, please. It will be some time ere he—wakes. He is safe from escape. Permit him to remain where he is, until such time as he comes once more to himself and has been told."

"Told!" Myrtle Baldwin sat up pale, erect. "Must he be told—must he? Oh, how dreadful!"

"Were it not kinder?" said Semi-Dual. Across his face there seemed to flit once more that shadow of sadness I had seen it wear before, and in his tones there breathed a compassion as deep as his great, kind soul. "Were it not more merciful to tell him here. He is no ignorant person to be driven blind with terror. He is no illogical lout, incapable of comprehension. Rather he is a man of high mental attainment, ability, and respected position, now fallen from his estate; a broken gentleman of spiritual fortune, but a gentleman none the less, deserving treatment as such.

"So shall not I, who in the name of cosmic need have torn away the veil from his dread secret, endeavor in whatsoever

way I can to help him face what comes? Shall not I, like that Angel of the Darker Drink, who shall at last meet us one and all upon the brink, myself proffer him the cup, and so invite his soul forth to his lips and help it even in so little, not too much, to shrink?"

An ache grew in my throat. Bryce was

breathing hoarsely. Johnson sat with his head sunk down in his collar. I glanced at Miss Baldwin. She was wiping her eyes.

Soft, mellow, the clock in the corner gave forth stroke after stroke of sound. Instinctively my eyes leaped to its face. The Eleventh Hour! And—

(The end.)

Canceled Rights

by

John
Holden



THREE quarters of a mile from town, Huldah Strome paused on a hot, dusty trail and flung a toil-hardened hand up against the glare of the morning sun.

She looked to the right, and her colorless lips pressed to a line of determination as she noted the brush-tangled countryside, with here and there the bone-dry remnant of a fire-killed forest poking skeleton limbs into the clear sky.

She whipped her stern gaze around to the left, and as she appraised the scene in that direction—the whitewashed homesteader's cabin in the clearing, the sun-baked yard and the lusty youngster shrilling his appreciation of life—a wave of emotion welled up in Huldah's flinty eyes that momentarily subdued and softened

the masculine harshness of her unlovely features.

She peered up and down the primitive trail as though her course of action was not quite clear in her mind; then, with the directness of one who scorns easy but circuitous paths, she climbed a rail fence and made straight for the homey habitation and the baby playing in the sun.

Homeless and loveless herself, other people's homes and children never failed to attract Huldah Strome. Fate had tricked and cheated her. To its scurvy apportionment of man-repelling eyes, bony nose, rigid lips and square jaw, it had added the mother-longing of the daintiest and most luring woman.

In a man-ruled world, Huldah could never enlist man-love and man-service;

but, thank God, she could fight men—had outbattled them to victory many times—and now that she faced the most significant man-struggle of all, she entertained scant doubt of victory.

Twigs snagged at Huldah's hat as she pushed through a patch of undergrowth, but the set of her hat never caused concern to this grim-visaged woman.

She smiled at the babe, but smiles did not become the man-mask of her woman's heart, and the child shrank from her. It was ever thus. Always the object of her heart's desire retreated. Her greatest desire of all, a baby of her own to mother, could never be appeased; but her other desires could be. Land and a comfy cabin, with lambs and little pigs and such dependent creatures to care for; that prize she would win were Dave Scott thrice the blackguard he was reported to be.

Huldah ascended a hen-tracked stoop and, lifting her voluminous skirt to avoid a litter of toys, knocked on the door.

A ravel-haired little woman in soap-sudsy gingham appraised her half-suspiciously before inviting her to enter.

"Thanks, but I'll not be stopping," said Huldah. "I just want to inquire which of the quarter-sections hereabouts is the one Dave Scott filed on."

"Scott's homestead is half a mile further on, first cabin to the left, a hundred paces or a mite over in from the trail," the housewife replied. "You're some relative of his, I s'pose?"

"No, ma'am," Huldah smiled grimly. "I've come to cancel his entry."

The effect upon the housewife was electrical.

"You mean take Scott's homestead away from him?" she gasped.

"I mean just that, ma'am."

"My sakes alive! Come in and set down." The soap-sudsy hostess wiped her hands on her apron and thrust a chair at Huldah. "You can't mean it! You wouldn't dast take Scott's land away from him," she palpitated.

"Why not? He lost all claim to the place long ago. The Canadian land law

says plain enough if you don't live on and cultivate your homestead you've got to give it up to some one who will."

"Sure; and it's a good law, too," acknowledged the housewife.

"Well then: Dave Scott has held his place nigh onto three years, and what's he done with it? Has he ever growed a shock of grain or a head of cabbage even?"

"We all know he lost his rights two years ago, but—say, ain't no one ever told you about Scott?"

Huldah's heavy jaw corded.

"I'm told he's made his brags that no one dast take his place away from him," she said.

"You'd better pay heed," the hostess warned. "Scott's a bad man. I believe he'd as lief kill a woman as a man. Since his wife died I doubt if he's been right in his head."

"Wife? I didn't know Scott ever had a wife," exclaimed Huldah. "All they told me down at Athabasca was that the man is a sullen brute who works on the scows with the half-breeds and ain't got a friend in the country."

The hostess hitched her chair closer and lowered her voice.

"Scott's missus died in the shack he put up on that homestead of his," she informed. "Maybe she died natural enough, but there's been talk. A big healthy bulk of a woman oughtn't to be took sick right sudden and go screeching and screaming the night she dies, ought she? It was said that Scott and his wife didn't get along none too good. The drunken old doctor who lived down at Athabasca then gave him a burial certificate all right and proper, but—well, as I say, there's been talk, and if I was you I'd surely let Dave Scott alone."

Huldah rose to her feet.

"Ma'am, if I could find another piece of good land close to a railroad in all Alberta, I'd leave Scott be. But I can't; the good land is all taken. Ma'am, for ten years I've slaved cooking men's grub in railroad and lumber camps so I could

get a bit of government land and improve it like a homesteader ought to. Scott hasn't even been trying to do his homestead duties. The law says he's lost his place, and I say so, too. It belongs to the first claimant who'll seed it and crop it; and that person, ma'am, is me."

Huldah descended from the toy-cluttered stoop. The babe smiled up at her and her answering smile momentarily transformed her harsh countenance.

"I s'pose you know the scow crews are expected up the river from Chipewyan to-night?" said her hostess.

"The quicker I lay eyes on Scott the better," replied Huldah. "Good day, ma'am, and thank you kindly."

Her coarsely shod feet on the trail again, Huldah pushed along, her heavy frame lurching to every jolting stride of her inelastic limbs. Little cloudlets of dust puffed up under her masculine heels and slowly settled.

The soft "caw, caw" of a crow, the tinkle of a far-off cow bell, and the drowsy whirl of insect wings accentuated the hot forenoon silence. A squirrel stopped to appraise the plodding woman and whisked off with a chatter of disdain.

Presently Huldah spied out the pine board shack that must be Scott's. No discernible roadway, no path even, led in to it. Neglect covered it like a mildew. A tiny clearing in front had grown up rank with pea-vine and pussy-willow, with here and there a blossoming wild rose which imparted a hominess that thrilled Huldah.

Her home! Of course it was her home, legally and morally. In all probability the original entrant, despite his reputed threat, was willing to relinquish it. Homesteaders who deliberately abandoned their entries usually were. Inasmuch as Scott would not lose the money he had expended in building the shack, he could have no legitimate grievance. But if he wished to fight, well and good. A nice time he would have ousting her. A home of her own!

Mumbling and cooing her satisfaction,

Huldah opened the unlocked door and entered. It was a three-room shack, flimsily constructed of pine sheathing with ship-lap weather boards outside and a building-paper finish inside. In one corner a rusty stove squatted on three legs with a length of pipe pointed at a tinned opening in the roof, which was almost flat and sloped from front to rear.

One of the inside doors revealed a small room, papered like the big room. The other door was locked.

Huldah peered through the keyhole of the locked door, but could see nothing. She went outside, but the room's single-sashed window was nailed on the inside and backed by a heavy green curtain.

The locked door caused her some concern. She reentered the shack and peered through the keyhole again, and thought she detected a musty, sickish odor emanating from the tiny opening.

"I reckon I'd better bust that door," she murmured suspiciously. She reached into the pocket of her billowing skirt to make sure that the pistol she had bought at Athabasca was there, then put her masculine shoulder to the panel.

"Shucks! What's the use of smashing things?" she reconsidered. "The dray man from town 'll be fetching my outfit after a bit, and like as not he'll have a key that 'll fit."

Huldah wandered about her claim. Exultation welled in her home-hungry heart as she calculated the grain-growing potentiality of the rich virgin soil. The ground was only slightly encumbered with shrubbery and fire-killed trees; just enough of the latter for firewood.

Bordering her quarter-section on the east was the convenient trail to the village of Athabasca; while touching her western boundary, where lay the only bit of waste land on her hundred-and-sixty acres, the Athabasca River threaded the valley like a yellow strand in a woof of green velvet. As she stood on the bench overlooking the river, the ravishing view held her gripped in a poise of enchantment.

Half way around the river's majestic

arc, within easy boating distance, the town's church spire flashed back the glinting sun. An insect orchestra hummed a dreamy obligato to the far-off whir of a mowing machine and the muffled chug-chug of a river launch.

Huldah sat upon the grassy earth and basked in the sun. She inhaled the exhilarating Alberta air in great lungfuls and rapturously pondered upon the one great gift that the propitious gods had seen fit to allot her. Her home!

"Right here I'll build my house," she planned ecstatically. "Where could a millionaire find a better view? And over there by the creek, I'll move Scott's shack for a barn. I'll have horses and cows and sheep with long-legged lambs and a flock of chickens with a struttin' old brahma rooster—cats and dogs and everything."

The heart-hungry woman breathed a little prayer of thanksgiving.

The sun swung to its zenith, but even under its direct glare Huldah found coolness in the shade. She ate her lunch and drank from a bubbling spring. She paced her lines. She found three government boundary posts and located her fourth corner by a crude triangulation of her own.

Once a bounding jack-rabbit halted near her. She raised her pistol to shoot it, having heard that rabbits were something of a pest, but the creature's frightened eyes and quivering body withheld her trigger finger.

"The poor beastie has as much right to his life as I have to mine," she murmured, and put up her weapon.

Late in the afternoon a wagon from town brought her first scanty purchases; a sheet-steel cook-stove, pine table and chairs, delft dishes, kitchen utensils and groceries, bed and bed-clothes; the barest household necessities, for Huldah's purse was none too long and she knew that homesteading is no vocation for the moneyless.

On the mysterious door she tried her

keys and the drayman's keys. It was no use. The drayman drove off and she decided to cook supper before lurching her heavy shoulder through the light panel. She was hungry and she had an uneasy premonition that she might not wish to eat after crashing through that door.

She cooked supper and ate it, and again tackled the problem of the locked door. She wished she had opened it in the daylight or when the drayman was present.

The ancient fire-killed trees with their white and withered branches creaking like skeleton bones in the mournful night breeze disturbed her. The moonlight was ghastly in its Northern vividness.

Once a low-pitched moan which swung to a wild shriek and slowly died away brought her quivering to her feet, pistol in hand. For one dreadful moment she thought the sound came from behind the locked door.

"Shucks! It's only a coyote," she fiercely reprimanded her unwonted timidity. "First thing I know I'll be getting as scared as any soft sister who has to depend on some brute of a man for protection."

With her lamp turned low to spare her oil, Huldah sat on a chair, eying the locked door, trying to gather courage to force it. She wished she had company of some sort; woolly lambs or kittens—anything that could be mothered and tended. She thought of the roly-poly toddler down the trail and she knew that lambs and kittens would not really fill the bill.

A bit ashamed of the maternal longing that grew more insistent as her loveless years advanced, Huldah rose and tilted her head against the crack of the door. She put her shoulder to it.

But, as before, she did not crash through the panel. The sound of a heavy footstep whipped her around, hand upon the pistol in her skirt pocket, as the dispossessed man flung open the outer door and stood on the threshold, glaring like an enraged rhinoceros.

Had his aspect been less malevolent,

Scott might have been a fairish figure of a man, with his raven hair and stern eyes, his broad shoulders and boldly hewn features. His faded blue shirt was open, disclosing a hairy chest and a bull-like neck.

With the air of a proprietary cave man, Scott flung upon a chair the coat he had been carrying upon his arm. He peered from corner to corner, then slithered, pantherlike in his moccasined feet, across the floor to Huldah's newly purchased table and glared across it.

"Howdy do, Scott," said Huldah.

"Where's your man?" Scott snapped.

"There's no man."

"There is. You'd never dare cancel me yourself."

"I'd dare a good many things, Scott."

"I'll give you two minutes to get out."

"I'm not going."

"You'd better."

Huldah laughed harshly.

"You can't scare me, Scott," she said.

"The government awarded me this place and I mean to keep it. You had your chance to earn title to it and you fell down. You've got no kick coming. I got the place fair and square."

"You didn't."

"Why didn't I?"

"I got no cancellation notice."

"The land office sent you warning two months ago you'd have to defend your entry or lose your place. If you were down river and didn't call at the post-office whose fault is that?"

"You've got to get out."

"*You've* got to get out."

"I'd rather you went peaceable."

"I'd rather you'd open this door; I was fixing to bust it."

At mention of the locked door, a fresh spasm of rage possessed Scott. He edged, tigerlike, to the end of the table, teeth clenched and fingers twitching.

"You'd go in that room, would you!" he snarled.

"Stop!" said Huldah.

Soft-footed as a lynx, Scott kept edging forward.

"Stop!" cried Huldah and leveled her pistol.

A whanging explosion tore the warning out of her mouth. Inexperienced with weapons, she had applied firing pressure to the trigger before she meant to. Through the smoke haze she saw Scott clutch at his breast, blink foolishly, sway, catch at the table, and go down on the floor in a boneless heap.

Instantly the horrified woman was on her knees by his side. She tore away his shirt and with her handkerchief sopped up the crimson flood from a ragged wound in his shoulder. The wound was more painful and stunning than dangerous, she quickly decided; but careful nursing would be necessary to avert complications.

Skilled in the rough surgery of grading and lumber camps, Huldah heated water, poured into it an antiseptic that she always carried, and bathed and bound the torn flesh. She quickly fixed up a bed in the unlocked room and helped Scott to it.

She resolved to take care of him. No need for a prying doctor with his retinue of mounted policemen and trouble. Besides, Athabasca did not boast a hospital and what other person would or could take care of Scott?

That night Huldah rolled in a blanket and slept on the bare kitchen boards.

Day after day she nursed her patient, the inscrutable man-brute who uttered no word of praise or blame, and in the nursing she found a certain alleviation of her fierce mother yearning. To wait upon the helpless; that was the one occupation that brought satisfaction to Huldah's lonely life.

Constantly she carried her pistol; but Scott showed no inclination toward trouble. One day he said:

"I suppose you're doing this for me because you've seen what's in the locked room?"

"I haven't been in it," said Huldah.

Scott stared at her in surprise.

"Go in if you want to," he said and indicated where the key reposed.

"I don't know as it's any of my business," Huldah demurred. "You can take whatever is in it along with you when you go."

"I'd rather you did; then you'll understand," insisted Scott, and Huldah said she would.

After she had washed the dinner dishes and her patient had dozed off, Huldah fitted the key into the lock and pushed open the door.

In the gloom she could see that the room was furnished. Dust was thick upon everything and the musty odor of stale air was strong. The bed-clothes were thrown back as if some one had just left the bed, and garments lay here and there where they had been carelessly tossed.

Huldah tripped the spring of the heavy blind and let it whiz and clatter to the window top. Again she cast her eye about the room, now flooded with light, and as she saw something she had not noticed in the gloom, she gasped and stood spellbound.

For a long time Huldah stood like a devotee before a shrine, dazed by the incredible revelation. Then she tiptoed softly from the room, closed and locked the door, returned the key to her patient's pocket, and went out into the open air.

Slowly she walked about the homestead that had been hers. Hers it still was, and hers it might remain, according to the act of Parliament; but, recognizing that law which transcends all statute books, Huldah knew that she must relinquish the place.

With tears in her eyes she wandered about the virgin tract, under cool trees and along the bank of the rippling streamlet. She gazed at the broad Athabasca, threading its majestic course through the green valley, and at the distant town squatting in the sun.

She thought of the terribly maligned man back in the shack; the derelict, heart-starved like herself, condemned to haunt the scene of his former happiness, a neighborless ghost of suspicion and mystery,

misunderstood by his fellow men because of his morose brooding over the things that were, heartsore and weary, a rudderless bark upon the stream of life, half-crazed by a memory.

Her thoughts wandered back along her own fierce struggle up the path of hardest resistance. Here some of her ideals might have blossomed and borne fruit. But she must relinquish them.

Slowly and sadly she paced back to the shack. Scott still slept the troubled sleep of the mind-burdened. With all her heart and soul, Huldah pitied him.

She took the key and again tiptoed into the room with the locked door. Her step awoke the sleeper, but she did not know it.

Again she gazed at the dust-covered woman's belongings flung here and there just as a woman's hand had left them; at the feminine toilet articles on the dresser; at the wisps of woman's hair still clinging to a tortoise-shell comb; last of all, at the neat pile of garments that explained, fully and completely, the mystery of the sudden passing of Dave Scott's wife.

She picked up a frilly little frock from a pile of similar fabrics, blew the dust from it and reverentially laid it down. With moist eyes, she fingered unused baby nighties and caps, tiny woolen undergarments, toylike little shoes and baby socks. Oh, the horrible calumny which hinted that the silent, morose man had slain his wife!

Only too well did Huldah realize the manner of the woman's passing. Small wonder that Scott could not bear to live alone upon the empty homestead. Small wonder that the man's passionate nature prompted fierce reprisal upon the invader of his sanctuary, the would-be desecrater of his holy of holies!

A footstep sounded behind her.

"You understand now?" Scott queried softly. "Some said I killed her—gossiping devils!—but you know the truth. Everything was just as her hand had left it. I wanted to keep the room that way forever. I wanted to be able to sit here

and imagine that she had just gone out and would be back in a minute. I could have killed the person who shifted one article by so much as a hair's breadth. But I was wrong. Thinking about her was driving me mad, and some day I would have done murder. You woke me up. The past is better forgotten. You can clean out the room. The shack and the homestead are yours. I am going away."

"No; the place is yours," said Huldah. "I'll go away."

In silence Scott gazed at the woman

who had shot him and then nursed him back to health of mind and body.

"Mis' Strome," he said, "we both love this place. We are both alone in the world, and it is not well to be alone. You have tended me as not even *she* ever tended me. The things that were are past and gone. Let us both stay."

Huldah looked into the honest eyes of the man, the nursing of whom had done so much to alleviate her heart's desire to nurse and tend.

"We'll both stay, Scott!" she murmured.



Move On!

by

Olin Lyman

IN the spring a housewife's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of vans. This is especially thus in New York, which even English enumerators admit is now bigger than London. So, when lovely women stoop to folly the ruthless moving men put the final touch on the high cost of living and harrowed husbands seek hasheries till the damnable deed is done.

That is, most of them; for the majority of wives revel in the confusion of transplanting metropolitan vines and fig-trees. But for Harold Pettibone Leggit there was no such luck. Not only had Mrs. H. P. Leggit won her point about the advisability of moving, but at the supreme

moment she sidestepped the responsibility and left the city to attend her mother, who lived in Yonkers and was ill. Let there be here entered a disclaimer of any assumed cause and effect in this fact; Yonkers is not the only community that residents fall ill in.

So behold Harold Pettibone Leggit armed with urgent and unappreciated authority to superintend the moving, to be done on a designated day after the ancient and immutable law of the Medes and Persian rugs.

Let it be entered of matrimonial record that Harold fought gallantly the migratory idea at its inception. He had not

been married long enough to become resigned. In fact, only a year had elapsed since Amy had endowed herself with what worldly goods he might amass through the medium of his legal shingle. And at the end of the first year the average husband has some fight left.

But Amy had a preference in rivers. During their twelvemonth of flat life they had inhabited four and bath of an apartment in Yorkville-on-the-East. Conceiving that six, with the bath continued, in Harlem-on-the-Hudson would be more *recherché*, Amy fought for her idea with the gameness of a thoroughbred. Harold, who was well satisfied where he was, finally surrendered.

Elate, she had gone flat hunting, to presently shout to him the matron's glad tidings of "Eureka!" Sulkily, however, he refused to visit it with her, asserting variously that he had a right or two left, that sufficient unto the day was the inferno thereof, and that if she was suited he would have to be.

So, upon the first day of May, early upon a morning of bright mockery, appeared before the Yorkville apartment the outfit of unrest for which Harold had telephoned, and the stated rental of which had almost induced an attack of premature apoplexy, for Leggit was barely five years out of college. The van was drawn by a pair of pensive Percherons and contained impedimenta consisting of a fat driver and two husky helpers.

The truck disgorged its overalled tenants, who under the watchful eye of Harold tramped up and down stairs, removing the Leggits' Lares and Penates to the truck. The young attorney was proud of his job. Doubtless because he was present the furniture had got this far without a scratch.

As the van got under way Leggit caught a cross-town car for the new abode in order to be on hand for the unloading. He figured that, as trucks go, the van should reach there in a couple of hours. With his proprietary presence to spur them on, the men would finish work in

another hour. This would afford him ample opportunity to keep an important business engagement for the early afternoon.

The surface-car made slow progress. Mostly it was obstructed by vans. Following its usual Maytime custom, Manhattan was mixing, Harlemites were hopping to the Bronx, and the daughters of Queens, abetted by knaves of truckmen, were hiking hopefully toward Kings. So there was the deuce to pay, and the town that deludes itself with the chimera that it is the prince of hustlers, swirled like that introspective maelstrom that is the final word in the exercise of lost motion.

Leggit arrived at his new home fearing that the van had preceded him. Reassured on that point, he looked critically at the building. It was more pretentious than his former habitation. He entered and ascended one flight, as his wife had directed him. The door of the new flat stood hospitably open. The rooms were large and light and airy. Harold's resentment was vanishing. It had not been such a bad move after all.

It must be time for the van now. He went down-stairs and looked up the cross street. There were vans enough in sight, but none of them proved to be his.

He glanced down the thoroughfare. A couple of blocks away was Riverside Drive, and beyond it showed a glint of the noble Hudson. But Leggit was not interested in the Hudson, but in a particular van. As the hours passed he became more so.

At a time of suspense two hours seem multiplied by many, and in the waiting of a red-haired man the time seems even longer. By the time the pair of Percherons plodded peacefully in sight, Harold was striding up and down the walk like a ham actor in a mad scene.

The fat driver pulled up in front of the apartment. Him Harold fixed with a stony glare.

"You'll excuse me," he remarked, in a tone that reeked of something sour, "but you look like a stationary tub to me."

"If I was in your place," admitted the man now proved to possess mental as well as physical breadth, as he climbed down, "I'd be sore myself. But I've had my troubles, boss."

"File them for evidence," savagely retorted the attorney, "and we'll mark the exhibits A and B."

"They're inside," explained the driver, waddling around to the rear end of the van. "Here, you bloats, come out of it!" He reached inside with imperious hands.

Forthwith, with hoarse growls of protest, the two helpers rolled out from their shelter and stood weaving on unsteady legs upon the pavement, blinking owlishly in the spring sunshine.

Leggit took one comprehensive look and boiled over like a coffee-pot.

"What in the name of the keel-hauled and lofty tumbling Gambrinus are you lugging around?" he yelled. "Believe me, if this is the result of our corner social institutions, I vote for grape juice from now on. What in sulphur and molasses did you let 'em get like that for?"

"Well," argued the fat Samaritan plaintively, as he held one of his fellows up, "I ain't a Keeley Institoot, boss. I'm a truck driver, an' I'm only one man against two. They wouldn't listen to me. They stopped three times."

"It looks to me as if they didn't stop at all!" stormed Leggit.

Uprose the husky voice of one of the helpers. "I want to take 'a nap," he said.

"Me, too," acquiesced the sleepy voice of his mate, and the motion was irrevocably seconded.

The driver resignedly looked at Harold. "They get like this about once a year," he explained. "It's usually around about now. They're always mild but stubborn. The only thing to do is to leave 'em sleep."

While his irritation mounted like wild-cat stocks, Leggit's glance seared the pair of irresponsibles. "Do they sleep standing up?" he snarled. "Or shall we festoon 'em over this iron fence?"

"They don't much care where they are,

but I generally stow 'em in a basement. What time is it now?"

Leggit looked at his watch, then looked again. He held the timepiece to his ear and shook it. His reproof came extra dry.

"It was noon when the mainspring busted. You can't blame the watch; it was overworked. I had it out a hundred and fifty times, waiting for you."

"Well," considered the driver, "these ducks won't rise for at least four hours. I know 'em."

"Well, let's store them, then, and you telephone for some more men."

"I can't get any more."

"What?" yelled Harold.

"Say, boss," reminded the driver, "do you know what day this is? It's *movin' day!* It's a day by itself. You couldn't get another man at this stage of the game if your mitt was frosted with dollars."

For perhaps two minutes Leggit attempted to do vocal justice to the situation. The fat driver, with his bullet head cocked on one side, listened admiringly.

"You talk largely in four syllables," he commented, "but I get your general drift. This is one of the occasions when I wish I had an education. I'm jealous of you."

"What are we going to do?" demanded Harold.

"Well," dubiously replied the driver, "maybe you could get the janitor to help me, though none of 'em never did yet. The only thing that's more prideful than a janitor is a plumber. But we got to do somethin', I suppose."

The mention of a word midway in the driver's communication produced upon Harold an effect like a peace proposition in a wrangle between the "wets" and "drys." For from the janitor of the apartment he had quitted he had endured much, though not in silence.

"You forget the janitor!" he growled. "Why, say, friend, I never believed in Satan till I knew a janitor. Now I know differently; there *must* be a place for those fellows after they die."

"Well," asked the driver in his turn, "what 'll we do, then?"

For a moment Harold considered and made a Napoleonic decision.

"My wife's gone to the country. She got me into this. Well, I'm game. I'll help you myself!"

The driver knew heroism when he saw it. His little eyes twinkled with admiration as they rested on Leggit's six feet of height, trim waist and fine shoulders. Then the sparkle was replaced with a sober light of appraisal.

"Ever done any?" he inquired.

"No, but I held the college record for putting the shot—"

"Tain't the same!" interpolated the fat man, shaking his head. "You got some heavy stuff here. By the time you've hoofed it up them stairs twice it 'll weigh like home cookin' in a lunch-room."

"Store your blind baggage," returned Harold, indicating the pair of helpless helpers who stood stolidly on either side of the driver, supported by his plump hands, "and lead me to it."

"I've warned you. Take one of these mutts, will you?"

They laid the two devotees of Bacchus on some sacking in the basement. The driver looked calculatingly at Harold.

"Say," he suggested, "you're a game guy, all right, but you don't know what you're gettin' into. Best strip off your coat an' collar an' wiggle into Con's overalls there. He's about your size."

So they stripped the blue denim off the oblivious Con and Harold climbed into the garment. As he was adjusting the straps over his shoulders steps were heard, and from the gloomy recesses of the basement came a man and stood before them.

He was not much of a man. There were about sixty inches of him, and he was as narrow as a provincial viewpoint. His goggling eyes held the vague look of eyes that search for ships that were never built. His face was a patient blend of timidity, vacuity, and *mañana*. A scrambled black mustache gloomed above a space that should have been occupied by

a chin. Glancing at him Leggit remembered the old story of the man who was not the man he used to be and never was.

The man looked uncertainly at the pair of recumbent figures on the floor, next at the driver, and finally at Harold. He cleared his throat nervously.

"Are you—" he began.

Across the pugnacious face of Leggit flitted the demoniac joy of the man who is about to slap an insect. Here was a vent for his taut nerves. That business appointment, which meant dollars, was missed. He must get even with somebody.

"Are you the janitor?" he cut in.

"Y-y-yes," stammered the man. A member of the innumerable caravan of jacks who during life try almost everything once, he was about to explain that it was his first day as a janitor. But Harold had no time to hear the story of his life.

"Well," he roared, glaring down at the roughly clad wisp before him, while he jerked his thumb backward at the pair of resting helpers, "I suppose you want us to check these two packages at a dime apiece? It's another form of the janitors' graft I've been reading about. Even the baby's milk bottle isn't safe from you highbinders! Well, let me whisper that you don't get it, see? These two malodorous mystics of Morpheus are going to munch grass in the fields of sleep as long as they malleable iron please, and they're going to make a dormitory of your domain without money and without price, see? Now move on, get me? Do a cockroach glide; fade out like a movie; beat it like a vegetable!"

"Y-yes, sir!" murmured the janitor, and slid. The fat driver, wearing a serious expression, and waving toward the lilies in Morpheus's fields of sleep that Harold had mentioned, at once rendered tribute and corrected what he conceived as his employer's misapprehension of mildly incriminating evidence.

"You sure siphoned him a tankful," he conceded, "but you're wrong about the

boys. They don't take morphin. It's only beer."

"Say!" gloated Leggit as they ascended the basement stairs to begin their task, "this is the crowning day of my young life! I know there's at least one janitor in New York I can pick on!"

The driver backed the truck up to the curb, then sighed as his gaze traveled downward over his contour that bulged like the stockholders' melon of a steel corporation in war times. Then he glanced enviously at Harold.

"You're younger 'n me, boss," he said. "Take care you keep your money distributed. I put all mine in one place."

The light of battle flamed from the Leggit eyes as the young attorney essayed the task that waited their hands. Said light began to wane on the third trip up. They were carrying a table that its owner had believed was composed of mahogany. Now he knew the material for pig iron.

His arms, that since his college days had been employed at tasks but little more strenuous than making oratorical gestures before the bar of justice and young men's political clubs, ached cruelly. The hinges of his knees had begun to creak. He was taking the head end of things and backing up the stairs. He was kept busy throttling an impulse to sit down.

To conceal a growing shortness of breath he looked down at the fat face below him and made irritable comment.

"What's the matter? You sound like an accordion!"

"It's the asthma," wheezed the driver, "I hadn't ought to be triflin' with this brac-a-bric."

"What *do* you do for a living?" inquired his employer sarcastically.

"Mostly drive an' boss."

As they were emerging from the flat, in quest of another load, they were met on the landing by the little janitor. He cringed as he met Leggit's gaze.

"Say," he began, swallowing hard, but Harold broke in upon him like a bursting shell.

"Listen!" he bellowed, shaking a vengeful finger under the shred's prominent nose. "You quit following me around, do you hear? I don't like you, I don't like your lodge. I don't want to have anything to do with you! If I ever need you for anything I'll send you a wireless! What do you mean by hounding me? What do you mean by it, hey?"

"It's the boys down-stairs," put in the driver, nodding wisely. "I know 'em. They're apt, at a time like this, to get up an' prowl around like sleep-walkers for a while. but they don't mean nothin' by it, an' they won't hurt no one. I suppose they made him nervous."

"You heard what he said," purred Leggit. "Now you go down those stairs, one by one. And if you chase me again with any more nonsense I'll spread you like a pancake!"

The tabloid preceded them down-stairs and stood watching, silent and miserable for a moment, while they tugged at a sofa that by now seemed to weigh a couple of long tons. Then slowly he returned to the basement.

The flare of Harold's initial aggression dimmed to its final snuffing. The driver, who wouldn't recognize an illusion if he saw one, had never had any flare. And a little later, remembering the accordion, he grinned at Harold in understanding.

"Boss," he said, "there seems to be a few clinkers in your own carbureter."

The Leggit cheeks, already crimson, turned redder. "I'm a little out of condition," he admitted. "But believe me, I was a good man once!"

The Falstaffian driver sighed. "That's the trouble with this world," he observed. "You got to be a good man more than once."

Some twenty minutes later, while with legs trembling like the Lilliputian body of one of those little black-and-tan dogs, Harold bore his head end of the library bookcase into the flat that even now bulged with goods and chattels, and set it down with a grunt, his gaze fell upon the figurative last straw.

There stood the janitor, bending over a trunk.

Harold reached him with a bound. On the rebound he untucked the janitor from the hollow of his good right arm and set him on wavering feet upon the landing. He glared ferociously down at a face which quailed with fear.

"When I kill a man," hissed Leggit, "I do it so politely that the city presents me with a vote of thanks. I drink gasoline cocktails and I chew dynamite instead of gum. I ran out of names for my private graveyard, so now we use a number system. Every time I'm annoyed an undertaker gets a job. Now you take your choice. Thirty seconds to live, or it's your move!"

The janitor moved hastily down the stairs, with a wild stare over his shoulder as if he feared Harold were mad.

The fat driver nodded with comprehension. "I see," he submitted judiciously, "you're sort o' takin' the job out on him!"

But for the remainder of that memorable session Leggit had to take it out on the job. The janitor, thoroughly scared now, appeared no more. Meanwhile, Harold and the driver, like the king of France's famous army on the hill, marched up the stairs and then marched down again.

In outfitting their flat Mrs. Harold Pettibone Leggit had gone strong on the heavy stuff. The driver commented on this fact at a mutual aching moment when life was merely a racking query concerning the sting in death.

The driver, deluged with perspiration, drew the back of a hand over his brow.

"What I'd like to see figured," he wheezed, viewing the heavy stuff with disfavor, "is the number of quarts in every pound!"

A little later Harold, up near the head of the van now nearly unloaded, gingerly passed out a large statuette that was the special pride of his wife's heart. "Be careful of this!" he called. "It's a choice Venus de Milo."

"Huh?" inquired the driver, but Harold was busy with other things. He emerged with them to find the driver with Venus cradled in his arms and gazing down at her classic features with absorbed interest.

"Ain't she the armless wonder, though?" he wanted to know. "I've seen pictures of this pippin. You got to hand it to her. With both wings gone she gets there just the same."

He followed Harold, who was carrying a rocker as heavy as a hangman's heart. Leggit finally set down the chair in the front room with an explosive sigh. The wailing voice of the driver came from the rear of the apartment.

"Say, boss, where 'll I put this thing?"

By this time the Leggit temper was a thing of shreds and patches.

"Ah, stand and hold it!" he snarled, as he passed down-stairs.

He waited there for the driver to descend and help him with another of those blamed divans. Five long minutes passed. Suddenly fear knocked at the Leggit mind. Perhaps the driver had died of asthma up-stairs alone.

He hurried up-stairs and to the dining-room. There stood the driver, breathing sterterosly, holding the Venus de Milo cradled in his arms.

"What are you doing?" gasped Harold.

"You said to stand and hold her, and you're the boss," retorted the driver, and bent upon Leggit a look of deep reproach.

"If the old woman ever seen me like that, it'd be a divorce," he asserted, "an' you'd be responsible. I don't feel decent."

Harold pondered and nodded gravely. "That's one on me," he acknowledged. "Put the lady down, now."

The driver complied with a show of reluctance and continued to watch the Venus, fascinated.

"How do you suppose she manages to keep her skirt on?" he asked in an awed voice.

"There are some things that are not for you or me to know," cautioned Leggit.

"Well," summed up the driver, trudging after him down the stairs, "if the old girl had a waist-line like mine it's a cinch she'd need suspenders."

The last half hour crawled by. Midway the driver, puffing spasmodically at a cigar which Harold had extracted from his vest-pocket and given him, paused to gaze with envy at the two Percherons peacefully standing.

"I'd ruther be one o' them brutes there, chewin' their cud's," he complained. "They're built for this sort of thing."

Harold had not the breath to reply. He nodded gloomily and grabbed his end of a piece of furniture to which the driver referred as a teet. He did not trouble to correct him.

Wearily he dragged his feet up the stairs for the closing trips. Every muscle was a stab, each bone was a boil, his head was tangled with weariness. He was reeking, as if he were sitting in a Turkish bath. The May sun, regnant in the bluest of skies, grinned joyfully down at him.

The driver, too, was a wreck. But in his forty-odd years he had somewhere picked up that philosophy that is prated of by smile scribblers.

As they were wearily taking out the last piece another loaded truck appeared around the corner and turned up their street. The driver nodded toward it.

"Crazy!" he declared. "Whole town gets crazy every May. My old woman moves us every year. Do you think women are people?"

They toiled up the stairs with the last load. With a common impulse they sat down and panted for a few minutes. Then they rose, facing each other with quiet smiles.

Disheveled, dirty, his hair tumbling into his eyes, Harold Pettibone Leggit put out a grimy paw. It was heartily grasped by the hand of the driver.

"A good job well done!" cried Harold. "Now, you remember that famous conversation between the Governors of the Carolinas? I'm new to this section; lead me to a corner."

Even as the driver was about to accede to the proposal he noted a curious change in the Leggit eyes. Good humor had been replaced by a baleful gleam. He was staring over his fat friend's shoulder.

"Now what in the realm of exquisite agonies and unavailing regrets and the prods ofimps eternal do you want now?" he inquired.

Somewhat fuddled, the driver made wondering answer.

"Why, didn't you ask me to have a drink?"

Then he suddenly grasped the fact that Leggit was not addressing him. He remembered that Harold was facing the door of entrance to the flat. He turned.

There stood the janitor.

"What do you want?" demanded Harold truculently, taking a step toward him. "I've said enough; I'm going to kill you, my friend, right now!"

The janitor retreated a step. Twice he tried to speak, and then achieved a squeak like that of a frightened rat.

"Be—be you Mr. Leggit?"

"Yes!" snarled Harold, "I'm Mr. Leggit!"

"I—I thought so," stammered the janitor, and opened and closed his mouth like a dying fish.

Toward him Leggit took one giant stride, then stopped short in wonderment, while the driver stared from behind him. "I—beg your pardon!" exclaimed Harold uncertainly.

For now behind the janitor appeared a beautiful young woman with a body-guard of three. They looked like van men.

"I tried to tell you, Mr. Leggit," stutered the timid janitor defensively. "You—you know I t-tried to tell you two or three times!"

"You tried to tell me what?" hoarsely questioned Harold. Somehow there overwhelmed his soul a billow of premonition; he felt that all-gone sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"You're in the wrong flat," replied the janitor. "Yours is the next flight up!"

SO LONG, BOYS!

BY LYDIA M. DUNHAM O'NEIL

So long, boys!
You are off to the war, with the sobs and cheers
Commingling, echoing, in your ears;
The sweetheart's kiss or the baby's cry
Gladdening, saddening your good-by.
With tears of sorrow and smiles of pride
We watch the troop-trains onward glide,
For the storm-cloud breaks, and the hour has come
To answer the summons to bugle and drum—
So long, boys!

So long, boys!
We solemnly gaze on the grand old flag,
Not in a spirit of bluster and brag,
But with love, and faith, and a silent prayer
To the God of Battles Who set it there,
His Sign of Freedom to all the world,
To His four wild, glorious winds unfurled.
His will ordained, and His angels wrote:
"Their valor shall keep it forever afloat!"

So long, boys!
"What is worth having is worth fighting for,"
And we know what it stands for, in peace or war.
Freedom to kneel where we choose to kneel—
Freedom to speak what the heart may feel—
Freedom from hatreds of creed and clan,
Ranks and distinctions made by man;
Untrammelled by king, unawed by crown,
And where is the hand that shall tear it down?

So long, boys!
The God of Battles be with you all!
But many must fight, and a few must fall,
As somewhere, some time, must come the end
To the boys at the front, be they foe or friend.
But we know that your hearts are stanch and true,
And you know that our hearts are all with you,
As you follow the colors and face the strife
To fight for the flag and the nation's life.

So long, boys!
Under the blaze of the shrieking sky,
Straight and sure may your bullets fly,
Straight to the hearts of your foemen all!
Though the tide of the conflict rise and fall,
May the snare-drum's echoing, jubilant beat
Sound always the tidings of victory sweet!
Army and navy, we trust in you!
Rifles ready! May your aim be true—
So long, boys!

How Sousa Came to Seven Troughs



by
John
Northern
Hilliard



I RESENTED the phonograph. There was something indecent in that metallic voice blaring out words so unspeakable as—

Only forty-five minutes from Broadway,
Think of the changes it brings;
In the short time it takes, what a difference it
makes
In the ways of the people and things—

while a full-bosomed moon hung above the mountains, flooding the Big Smoky Valley with a warm, golden light that transformed chamiso and sage into outlandish arabesques.

“I’ve heard pianolas in Samarcand, and seen ‘movies’ in Bokhara,” I remarked to the moon, “but I never expected to hear one of those blasted things down here on the edge of Gehenna. When I come again they’ll be having cabaret shows in every outfit, and the range will be so infested with automobiles a chap ’ll have to be quicker than a flea to keep ’em from biting his ankles.”

The foreman of the Golden Arrow,

sprawled on the veranda, his head pillowed on a Cheyenne saddle, said something unprintable about music in general and phonographs in particular, which, for reasons of my own, deeply interested me. I had been at the ranch for some time, gathering material for a series of magazine articles on trapping outlaw horses in the central Nevada Mountains, and my acquaintance with Sharrocks had ripened into friendship.

Little by little I had got to know something of his beginnings, his long eventful career on the great ranges, his success as a trapper and tamer of wild horses, which is at once the most perilous trade and the finest sport in the world. It is full of excitements, dangers, and big rewards; and those that follow it professionally are never annoyed by life-insurance agents.

—B-r-r-r-r—and imagine—b-r-r-r-r—Broadway. Only forty-five minutes from here—b-r-r-r-r—ump!

“Thank Heaven!” I said fervently, as the cylinder stopped whirring, and in-

stantly I became aware of the awful silence of the desert asleep—a silence so deep, so vast it seemed to tremble on the verge of sound. Then Mrs. Sharrocks's creamy voice came through the sitting-room window.

"Here's your fav-o-rite, Dave."

Followed a blur of sounds like a spitting duet between tomcats, and out of the silver-and-purple night gibbered the profane measures of "El Capitan." It was like waking up from the last sleep to hear the Archangel Gabriel twiddling ragtime on a concertina.

Sharrocks sat up suddenly and pointed an accusing pipe-stem toward the window. "She always plays that damn'd tune when she wants to get even with me. Got a grouch on just 'cause I wouldn't drive her over to the Four Bar outfit to see the new manager's baby." His voice softened. "No matter how good a woman is, there are times when she just natch'ly rejoices to rub it into a man—if she knows his sore spot."

I smoked in silence and reflected upon the anomalies of existence. Was this Dave Sharrocks, absolute monarch of the hardest-riding, hardest-drinking, quickest-shooting outfit that ever straddled leather?

Of course I was aware that Janet, after the manner of wives that are wholly adored of their husbands, twisted this iron hulk of a man shamelessly around her fingers; but I had never dreamed that he had any of the weaknesses common to the ordinary or garden variety of married man.

A long chuckle disturbed my meditations, and looking down at Sharrocks I could see, in the moonlight, a slow grin split his long face in two parts.

"Ev'ry time I hear that tune," he drawled, "I'm reminded that man can make more kinds of a double-dyed ass of himself than any other critter on the face o' the earth. That's where women have the edge on us. They're so dern sure of themselves—even when they're wrong."

The last notes of "El Capitan" dribbled off the fluttering cylinder, and with

a flash of intuition I linked up the foreman's philosophy with the phonograph. "Where did you get that devil's instrument?" I demanded.

Sharrocks puckered his warped face into an enigmatic smile. "That was a present from my old friend John Phillip Sousa. It was what you might call a soovenir—a soovenir of the only performance my friend John Phillip Sousa ever gave to the effete society of Seven Troughs."

"Effete fiddlesticks!" I snapped. "Quit consuming your own smoke, Dave Sharrocks; begin at the beginning, keep on till you come to the end, then stop."

Sharrocks reflected for the length of half a pipe. "You remember my telling you how I first met Janet, when she was shooting biscuits in the railroad hash-house over at Yreka Junction?"

I nodded. "The time Black Jack Kililay filled you with lead for courting her?"

"The same. It was six months after the doctors had carved Black Jack's bullets out o' me before I was able to climb into a saddle again. But jus' soon 's I could ride without spitting blood I got a job as foreman of the Diamond Hitch outfit, over near Seven Troughs, and Janet and I were hitched up in double harness. That's why I never held no grudge against Black Jack. The way I look at it, my good luck began that night he dropped me on the floor of the Blue Eagle saloon."

"Dave, dear," said a soft voice at the window, "I won't ever play that horrid march again."

"I'll not deny it's irritatin', Janet. Ev'ry time I hear it I feel like a two-year-old slugging against a snaffle for the first time. But as a rule we Westerners are sunny-tempered children of nature that never bear malice and—and I'm drivin' over to the Four Bar outfit in the mornin'."

Janet tossed a kiss through the window, and although I turned my back, I have reason to believe that it was volleyed back and forth across the window-sill to a

deuce set. I have often wondered since why Solomon, in his wisdom, never said anything about the way of a wife with her husband.

"As I was saying," Sharrocks went on, leaning comfortably back against the house, his head near the window, "I was foreman of the Diamond Hitch Ranch, and being the only married and respectable member of the outfit, the boys elected me school commissioner."

"He was chairman of the board three terms," interposed Janet, the note of wife-ly pride in her voice. "I always tell him he'd ha' been a county commissioner or something if we'd stayed over there."

"We've all our leemitations, Janet," her husband replied with a burr—his people had come from the north of Scotland. "I can mix a bran-mash that 'll put a down-and-out, swaybacked, wind-suckin' skate on his hoofs in thirty minutes by the watch, but as a politician I'd be the rankest sort of a selling-plater. Howsomever, that's neither here nor there. I was a school commissioner once upon a time, and it was in pursuance of my official duties that I made the acquaintance of Azro."

I pricked up my ears. "Azro? The name sounds like a cough-syrup."

"Azro was the greatest wonder of his age," said Sharrocks solemnly. "At least that was what the bills said."

Janet sensed my bewilderment. "You know—the kind that pulls ducks out of your clothes and cooks eggs in a hat. I used to see 'em in the old days at Tony Pastor's—when I was a girl."

"You mean a magician," said I.

Sharrocks nodded. "That's what it was on the bills—'Azro, the World's Greatest Magician, assisted by Sousa and His Band of Sixty Musicians'—printed in big black letters that stood out like a new brand on a flea-bitten mule. You could read the blamed thing a mile away.

"But the 'World's Greatest' didn't look the part the morning he blew into Diamond Hitch territory. I was saddlin' up when he rode into the corral on a sleek,

grain-fed, iron-gray gelding. If he'd been on foot I'd 'a' taken him for a tramp, for he looked as if he hadn't shaved for a week, and his clothes were dirty and ragged. But you forget all that as soon as the fellow looked at you. His gray eyes were puckered 'way down in a bed of wrinkles—I once saw an elephant in a circus over at Virginia City that had the same kind of eyes—and he had a smile that would win the heart of a wooden Indian.

"'Mr. School Commissioner Sharrocks, I believe,' said he, holding out his hand.

"'The same, *hombre*,' said I, reaching out my own paw. Then a suspicion flashed through me. His hand was soft and white as a woman's. I said to myself, 'Old boy, you've never done a day's work in your life,' and stretched my neck to get a peek at the gelding's brand—casual like, you know, as if I wa'n't interested in anything in particular. But the son-of-a-gun read my mind.

"'It's all right, bo! I didn't glom the skate. Allow me.' He reached out his hand, and so help me Jerusalem if a big, white card didn't appear at his fingertips! Yes, sir-ee, picked it right out of the air! Under my very eyes! He handed it over with a bow, and I read, 'The Great Azro, the World's Master Mage of Magic.'

"'U-m-m-m,' said I, scratching my head. 'What's your line, stranger, three-card monte or the shells?'

"Azro grinned. 'Friend,' said he, 'I represent the niftiest little turkey show that ever trotted down the trail. I don't mind telling you, in the language of the brook, I'm the only ripple on the sea of magic. I've got a little bag o' tricks that puts Señor Mephistopheles among the also rans. Furthermore, at each and every performance the great and only Azro is assisted by the world-famous Sousa and his incomparable organization of sixty musicians.'

"'John Phillip Sousa, the March King?' said I, for I had heard a lot o' his

music when Janet and I were on our honeymoon.

“‘The same,’ said he, ‘supported by his incom—’”

“‘I’d sure like to shake his hand,’ I interrupted.

“‘You two gentlemen ought to know each other,’ he said cordially. ‘I think it can be arranged. You see, we’re billed for a performance in Seven Troughs to-night—if we can get a permit to use the school-house. I came out to see you about that.’ He reached up and plucked another card out of the air. “Of course, as chairman of the school board you are entitled to the courtesy of the house. Allow me—a pass for two—with Mr. Sousa’s compliments—and—my own.’

“Hell, I couldn’t turn the fellow down after that! Besides, I wanted to meet Mr. Sousa and tell him how much me and Janet had enjoyed his music. So I invited Azro into the house, and while I was making out the license Janet cooked him breakfast.

“She took to the fellow at first sight, and all the morning he hung around the house, reading her palm and giving her a lot of palaver about the future that fussed her up like she had inherited money. He sure was a wonder at slinging language.”

“He told me I was going to be married twice—that my second husband ’d be rich and handsome,” cooed a voice from the window. “That’s what set Dave so against the poor boy.”

Sharrocks shook his head. “Maybe I *was* a bit jealous—maybe I’d be a bit jealous now if a fellow with Azro’s eyes an’ smile came hangin’ around the kitchen, discussin’ with that glib tongue o’ his the problems of love, marriage and divorce.”

I heard Janet laugh softly to herself. “What happened then?” I demanded.

“Man,” said Sharrocks, “that show was the social event of Seven Troughs. All the—what do you call ’em?—the e-lyte was there in their best chaps, spurs manicured, and guns polished up and oiled like the boys was attendin’ a church

social or a lynching bee. It wa’n’t every day a real, sure-nough celebrity blew into Seven Troughs, and we was figuring on giving John Phillip Sousa the reception of his life.”

“Was Black Jack Killilay there?” I asked, remembering the duel the two men had once fought for the favors of the buxom Janet.

“Black Jack was there with a gun packed on each hip, and a lot o’ th’ Four Bar fellows was with him—the toughest, on-eryiest, meanest bunch of hellions on the range. I selected our seats judgmatically, so that I could keep one eye on the platform and the other on Black Jack. You’ve got to give that mud-headed son of a she-ass credit for being hell-fer-kitin’ on the draw.

“But all the same, before the show began, I kept an eye peeled for that man Sousa and his sixty musicians. I thought it kinda strange we didn’t hear ’em tunin’ up their fiddles, but Janet explained that probably they came on for the second part of the program.

“Sure enough, when the curtains were hauled aside, friend Azro—shaved and washed—came out and announced that for the first half of the program he would endeavor to amuse the audience with a few original experiments in sleight of hand. He was as full of language as a railroad folder, that boy!”

Sharrocks chuckled as he stroked his chin.

“And say, he could talk with his fingers, too, that Azro! You couldn’t a’ got me into a poker game with him, not for money, chalk or marbles. He was slicker ’n any greaser I ever saw, when it come to fingering the pasteboards. And talk about the hand deceivin’ the eye! ’Jever see a helldiver bob at the flash of a gun? Well, compared with that fellow Azro Mr. Helldiver ’d have about as much show as a way-freight in a race with the Golden State Limited.

“Lord! I thought th’ roof ’d fall in when he pulled a whole outfit o’ baby clothes and a woman’s bustle and stock-

ings out of Baldy McInness's Stetson. And when he frisked a ton or more o' playing cards out o' Black Jack's pockets and a squawking duck from his Sunday-go-to-meetin' coat, the old school-house rocked like an earthquake was humping itself under the foundation.

"It didn't please Black Jack any too much to be made a fool of before the boys, and his little pig eyes blazed with fire as he stumbled off the platform with that fool duck squatting on his shoulders, flappin' its wings and squawkin' like Billy-be-dammed. I thought I'd burst my sides a laughin', but at the same time I kept a hand as near my gun handle as I could without discommodin' my neighbor.

"That ended the first part of the show, and soon as the curtains dropped I perked my ears for the scrapin' of fiddles. 'Wonder why they don't tune up,' I whispered to Janet. 'They're real musicians,' said she, haughty like, as if she knew all about the subject. 'They don't have to keep monkeyin' with the strings like old Pop Schneider over at the Four Bar outfit.'

"Not wanting to expose my ignorance any further I plugged up with navy and settled back to await developments; but all the time I was revolvin' in my own mind how on earth a band of sixty musicians could keep so blamed quiet.

"Then the curtains were drawn again and friend Azro swaggered out with a smile on his face and a little box in his hand. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, placing the box on the table what he had used for his tricks. 'I have given you the magic part of the evenin's entertainment. You will now have the pleasure o' list'nin' to a selection by th' world-famous March King, Mr. John Phillip Sousa and his incomparable band of sixty musicians. The first number on the program is the popular march entitled "El Capitan."

"With that he jerks off the cover, whips a tin horn from under his coat, and in less time than it takes a jackrabbit to dodge behind a sagebrush thicket, there was a measly little phonograph grinding out 'El Capitan.'

"The first thing I figured was that all hell 'd break loose in a minute, and I reached for my gun. But—I don't expect you to believe it, but it's Gawd's honest truth I'm telling you—that audience never moved a muscle, or batted an eye.

"It flashed through my mind that Azro had 'em all hypnotized, for that bunch of hellions just sat there as meek as little Sunday-school boys listenin' to a few remarks from the pastor. But it didn't take me long to savvy that for all his swagger and carelessness Azro was watching that audience like a mother hen watches a hawk.

"'He's got nerve, all right,' I said to myself, 'but he's bucking against the wrong gang if he thinks he can ring a cold deck in a game like this. Something's going to happen.'

"Janet had the same idea, for she dug me in the ribs. 'Dave Sharrocks,' she whispered, 'if you let them hurt that boy I'll never speak to you again.'

"'The age o' miracles has gone by,' I whispered back. 'But I'll keep an eye on Black Jack.'

"Then all of a sudden things begun to happen. No sooner had the last note trickled out of the tin throat than the audience was on its feet, and wop! every gun in the room but mine was trained on friend Azro. But he never turned a hair. He stood there smiling into those black muzzles like he had no trouble in the world. I was beginning to like the fellow, even if he had slipped an ace from the bottom of the deck.

"Black Jack stepped forward. 'Shootin's too good for him,' he snarled. 'We'll hang him to a tree,' and while he kept a gun trained on Azro a lot of his gang rushed outside to get ropes.

"Janet grabbed my arm. 'Now's your time, Dave! Get him away from here!'

"'A fine chance I'd have against that bunch,' I said. Then I remembered how friendly Janet had been with the fellow that morning and something began to rile inside me. 'I reckon he deserves all that's comin' to him,' I says.

“‘Dave Sharrocks,’ said she, ‘are you goin’ to stand here and see that boy murdered before your eyes?’

“‘Don’t see as there’s anything else I can do,’ I answered.

“‘I thought I’d married a man!’ she blazed back, and I could feel every one in the room looking at me—that is, every one but Black Jack. He had his eyes glued on Azro.

“‘I knew at the time I didn’t have any right to say what I did, but for the life of me I couldn’t keep the words back. ‘I suppose you think it’s a good chance to get that second husband!’

“‘She looked me square in the eye. ‘Dave, do you mean that?’

“‘Yes,’ I said like a damn fool. ‘I believe you’re stuck on that faker up there. Well, you’re welcome to him.’

“‘For a moment Janet stood there calm like, a faraway look in her eyes, the back of one hand on her hip, and her toe tapping the floor.

“‘The room was so quiet you could hear the horses switchin’ their tails outside. Then she turned to me, and I saw her lips curl.

“‘You coward,’ she said.

“‘That was all, but the words cut into my vitals like a knife. Gawd! To stand there like a yellow cur and be shamed before that crowd by my own woman—”

Sharrocks swabbed his forehead with his sleeve. “‘Sometimes, even now, I wake up in the night with the sweat just pouring off me. It’s the only bad dream I ever have—”

An arm reached across the window-sill, and a white hand brushed his shoulder gently.

“‘That’s why I can’t ever hear that confounded tune without—well, without feeling like murdering somebody.”

“‘I’ll break the record to-morrow,’” Janet said softly.

“‘No,’” said Sharrocks. “‘It’s a good thing for a man to be reminded once in a while what a fool he can be.’” He turned to me, and there was a vibrant note of pride in his voice. “‘It helps

me to remember what a thoroughbred that wife o’ mine is.

“‘Man, you just ought to have seen her after she’d called me down before that crowd! She sailed across the room to where Black Jack stood, backed up by his gang, and said in her sweetest voice: ‘Will you let me have one of your guns, Mr. Killilay?’

“‘Certainly, ma’am,’ said Black Jack, doffing his Stetson and handing her one of his guns.

“‘Thank you,’ said Janet, and, honest, honey isn’t any sweeter than her voice was. Then she turned to the platform and leveled the gun at the smiling Azro.

“‘Can you do anything else?’ she says to the magician.

“‘No, ma’am,’ said Azro, ‘much as I’d like to oblige a lady.’

“‘Janet cocked the gun. ‘Yes, you can. You can dance.’

“‘And Azro danced. For one mortal hour he hopped about the stage. If he slowed up a bit Janet would take a pot shot at his feet, and Mr. Azro’d bounce up into the air again lively as a bobcat.

“‘For a fellow what didn’t know anything about dancin’, Azro was some agile on his hoofs. Lord, how he did caper about that stage! The sweat just sluiced off him, his tongue slobbered over his chin, an’ I reckon his in’ards must ‘a’ been shook up like bran mash. A hungry flea had nothing on that boy when it comes to being in sixteen different places at one time.

“‘Funny how he knew all the fancy steps! Just took nach’ral to ‘em, I suppose, same’s a puppy takes to swimmin’ first time you throw him in the water. It made no difference what kind o’ figure the boys suggested, Mr. Azro danced it. Hornpipes, jigs, and high-land flings were as easy to him as Money Musk or Old Dan Tucker. But his preference was the hornpipe—I reckon because it kept his feet way up in the air most o’ th’ time.

“‘Between figures he’d take a chance

and slow down long enough to beg for mercy with his eyes. Poor beggar! I was sorry for him—so sorry I almost forgot my own trouble. But every time he looked at her that way Janet 'd speed up on the trigger and away Azro 'd go up in the air again. Then that gang of bowlegged hellions would laugh an' clap their hands and tell Janet to shoot faster.

"Soon as she'd empty one gun she'd lay it down on the platform in front of her and the boys 'd hand her another. It wa'n't long before the bunch got so excited they quarreled among themselves for th' privilege o' being next. Then I savvied her game. She appeared careless like in choosin', as the boys crowded round her, but I saw she was doing her work judgmatically. Man, it was worth watchin'—to see that wife o' mine weed-ing the guns out o' Black Jack's gang!

"The faster she worked, the higher friend Azro danced. She used both hands—popping away like a machine gun, till the platform was heaped up with shooting irons and the smokeless powder stunk up the room worse 'n rotten eggs.

"Then—it was all done in a flash—she had Black Jack's gun in her hand. I reckon he was so excited he didn't know what he was doing, for he'd been holding on to that second gun o' his like grim death. As soon as she grabbed it Janet held up her hand, and the bunch quieted down sudden like. She turned to Azro, who was leanin' against the table trying to pump some air into his lungs.

"'Mr. Azro,' she said, 'I think you have entertained this audience enough for one evening. I reckon there's no one here what 'll ask to have his money back. But if I was you I'd get out o' here as quick as Gawd Almighty 'd let me—and I wouldn't wait to saddle my hoss!'

"I heard the crash of glass as I sprang toward Janet, and caught a twinkling glimpse of the great Azro's feet going through the back window. The next instant I was grindin' my gun into Black Jack's ribs.

"'Up with your hands, you swine!' I said, for he was reaching for a knife.

"'All hands in the air!' sung out Janet, fanning the crowd with her gun for all the world like a professional hold-up man."

Sharrocks chuckled deep in his throat as he tapped the ashes from his pipe.

"Man, it was a sight to make angels laugh—to see that gang of punchers stuck up there just as if they'd been naughty little boys at school what the teacher has punished for breakin' rules. They all had sickly grins on their faces—all except Black Jack, who looked mad enough to eat me shirt and all if he ever got the chance.

"And as we stood there we could hear the thudding feet of a horse galloping down the trail. The sound grew fainter and fainter, and when it died away Janet laughed and lowered her gun.

"'We've had a pleasant evening, haven't we, boys?' she said.

"And with one voice—all except Black Jack and me—they shouted back, 'You bet we have!'

"Then Baldy McInness jumped on a chair and shouted, 'Three cheers for Janet Sharrocks!' I prodded my gun a little harder into Black Jack's ribs, and he joined in the chorus.

"'Thanks, boys,' said Janet, throwing them a kiss. Then she turned to me.

"'And now, Mr. Sharrocks,' said she, 'if you'll get that phonograph, we'll be going home. I've got a week's baking to do in the morning.'"

ONE Flag, one land, one heart, one hand,
One Nation evermore!

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes.*

Heart to Heart Talks



By the Editor



WOMAN—speaking in the abstract, of course—occupies a position in the life of man analogous to religion. A man with no woman in his life is like a man with no religion—incomplete, unfinished, of no particular use to himself or any one else; he is a mere shadow of a man; a lost spirit wandering in a plane to which he does not belong, and the fact that he may achieve the outward semblance of material and worldly success doesn't alter his real status. The extremist might go so far as to say that even a bad woman is better than no woman at all, even as a bad religion is better than no religion; anything being better than a *Tomlinson*, "neither spirit nor spike, nor book nor brute," and scorned alike in heaven and the other place. But it is about the good woman and her influence that we are speaking, and the wonderful scope and power of that influence was never more powerfully illustrated than in the remarkable five-part serial beginning next week. It is called

THE MAN IN EVENING CLOTHES

BY JOHN REED SCOTT

Author of "The Cab of the Sleeping Horse," "The Last Try," "The Impostor," etc.

Colin Marjoribanks, third son of the old *Earl of Warrington* and second secretary to the British Embassy at Washington, is the hero. Now, third sons of great English families are of just a little less importance (in the family) than the eldest son's second-best hunter, and when the head of the family isn't overly wealthy, the allowance that reaches the third son is not apt to be princely; neither is the stipend of a second secretary. But the position in the world that even the *third* son of a peer and the *second* secretary of the embassy is expected—even bound—to keep up, requires quite considerable cash. You can see the fix it puts a man in. It is a bad system, of course; it puts a premium on the illegitimate use of one's wits—because the legitimate use of them is barred—and exposes one to more than his share of temptation.

Colin Marjoribanks, however, doesn't think so; in fact, having no particular responsibilities, he doesn't think about it at all. He calls his temptations "happy chances," and when they don't turn up often enough, he goes scouting for them until—a new ambassador comes to Washington, and with him his lovely daughter—and *Colin's* childhood playmate—the *Honorable Patricia Pakingham*. Then something happens to *Colin*—something rather like a psychological revolution—and the effect of it is amazing, not only to *Colin* himself, to that mysterious and that accomplished rogue, the Man In Evening Clothes, but likewise to the reader—*especially* to the reader—which is one of many reasons why you must not fail to begin this really extraordinary story—NEXT WEEK.

IN our issue of October 21, 1916, we printed a novelette by Varick Vanardy, in which a gentleman baptismally named *Boniface Maxwell*, but more familiarly known as "*Pincher*," looked into the eyes of *Anita Delorme*, heard the sound of her voice, marked very carefully what she said—and did it. That story was called "Why Pincher Turned Straight," and in our next week's novelette, the influence of *Anita Delorme* will be found to be of paramount importance in the riddle of

WHY PINCHER SLOPPED OVER

BY VARICK VANARDY

Author of "*Alias the Night Wind*," "*Missing—\$81,500*" "*That Man Crewe*," etc.

Again looking into *Anita Delorme's* eyes—even though he does not know where she is—Pincher again does the thing he is quite sure *she* would have him do; and though men have been influenced in this way since the beginning of time—though Pincher is no exception in that particular—he is surely the interesting hero of an exceptionally interesting story.

Which you will thoroughly enjoy.

Next week.

"THE COG IN THE MACHINE," by Suzanne Buck, is a capital little story that gets behind the scenes of life in general, and gives you a glimpse of things from the inside—looking out. *Nelly McNulty* does not occupy a position of extraordinary importance in the world, but she sees things—many, many things that are as vital and as virile—and the opposite—as the breath of life itself. And because she does see things and know them for what they are worth when she sees them—which is the important point—she is of immense importance to the man who—well—to the man in the case. You'll like *Nelly*. Also the story for which she is so splendidly responsible.

SOMEWHERE in the world of each man is the woman; the true love affinity. You've heard that before probably, but did you ever hear of a hate affinity; a person who from the very first moment you come in contact with him—or her—affects you as a red rag does a bull; whose every moment—whose very existence—infuriates you? Well, that is the theme of the powerful story, "HATE AFFINITY," by William H. Hamby, which we are giving you next week. And that, I think, is all I shall tell you about it. Only don't fail to read it; it is one of the strongest and most gripping stories we have given you for some time.

THERE have been legions of stories written around the subject of buried treasure, and there

will be legions more ere the making of books shall cease to be. But we doubt if the idea in "BE YOUR OWN BANKER," by Samuel G. Camp, has ever been even vaguely "pulled" before, particularly in respect to the matrimonial climax that puts the finishing touch upon *Elmer Terry's* "supreme anxiety." *Elmer* is a left-handed pitcher, which means that he is temperamental. He's a good pitcher, too, but this story has nothing to do with pitching. You'll laugh and know why—next week.

THE ALL-STORY has a new claim to fame—it is the only magazine that publishes the work of five members of one family. Of course, families all the members of which are in the genius class are rare, but that only makes the achievement more noteworthy. I. W. Topping, whose clever story of the far north, "THE FOX TRACK," we are publishing next week is the head of this talented family. Maria Chipman Topping, who wrote "The Hill Man," is his wife; Helen Topping Miller, with whose short stories you are all familiar, and Lucile Topping Howell, the poetess, are his daughters, and James Henry Topping, author of the *Mrs. McJimsey* stories, is his son. Some family! Some magazine! Also, some story—this last one. Be sure and read it.

KICKS INTERESTING, TOO

TO THE EDITOR:

Enclosed find stamps, for which send me the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for week ending February 10. I missed getting this number.

Though I have been a reader of your magazine for years, I have never subscribed, as I don't care to wait for mails. This is the first I ever missed. I started with *The Argosy* in 1805, *Munsey* first number, *All-Story* first number, *Scrap-Book* first number, the *Cavalier* first number, also one which I believe was called the *Ocean*, which was amalgamated with the *Cavalier*, as was also the *Puritan*. And so I must be satisfied with the goods, although I like to read the kicks from your correspondents; it makes the letters more interesting.

WILLIAM A. ADAMS.

130 Piquette Avenue,
Detroit, Michigan.

CAN'T KEEP HOUSE WITHOUT 'EM

TO THE EDITOR:

Please send our ALL-STORY WEEKLY and *Munsey* magazines to Morrison, White Side County, as that is our address after March 1, and we would not lose a number for the price of three.

We have taken both magazines for almost ten years; think we cannot keep house without

them. Have had every number since the first one we ever saw, as we fell in love with it at once, and think ALL-STORY WEEKLY a little the best reading we ever had, especially since it became a weekly visitor, and I read and enjoy everything; and as I lived in the south, know Mr. Means's stories are true to nature, so enjoy them very much.

MR. and MRS. HENRY REISKE.

Milledgeville,
Carroll County, Illinois.

A STRAW OR TWO

The following extract from a letter, written by a lady living in Charleston, South Carolina, is a slight indication of the way the wind blows. Remember that Legerton's is the Brentano's of Charleston.

. P. S.—By the way, when I phoned Legerton's book-store to reserve me three copies of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for Saturday, March 10, they replied that they had sold out every copy on Wednesday. I did not know it was out till Thursday. They have ordered more, they say.

APPEALS TO ROMANTIC SOULS

TO THE EDITOR:

I am a girl seventeen years old, and a regular bookworm. Among other enjoyable recreations, I count reading one of my best. I have been reading the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for about three years, and I surely like it. I have noticed that the majority of your readers like Edgar Rice Burroughs's and Zane Grey's stories best. I surely agree with them. I have read most all of Grey's novels and all of his stories that have appeared in your magazine. He is one of my favorite authors of fiction. Burroughs's *Tarzan* tales are the kind that give you enjoyable thrills. At least, they affect me that way. The latest novelette, "The Fire Flower," was good. That kind of story appeals to my romantic soul.

I have been reading Heart to Heart Talks all morning, and I enjoy them. The ALL-STORY WEEKLY surely has varied readers.

MARY EMMA WHEATLEY.

Box 70,
Palo Pinto, Texas.

EACH STORY BETTER THAN LAST

TO THE EDITOR:

It seems about once a year I must write and congratulate and thank you for the pleasant hours I have had reading the wonderful stories, each one better than the one before. I never look for a sequel to a story, but somehow think "The Argus Pheasant" needs one. Don't you?

What has happened to the *Night Wind*, *Semi-Dual*, and *Crewe*? We'd like to hear from them once in a while so we'd know they are still on the list. (By we, I mean the Heart to Heart readers.)

Am anxiously waiting for any Western or Northern stories; I am very fond of them. Can't come too often for me.

Delighted to see Achmed Abdullah is going to be with us next week; he is great. So is Zane Grey, Jackson Gregory, E. J. Rath, Hulbert Footner, Frank Condon, and E. K. Means. In fact, if I started to tell all the authors and stories I like, I would want a page of the Heart to Heart Talks, and also would take up much of your time.

Wishing the ALL-STORY WEEKLY, *The Argosy*, and the *Munsey* all kinds of good luck, as I think they are the best magazines going.

MRS. E. McDERMOTT.

1752 Topping Avenue,
Bronx, New York.

"A LESSON IN EVERY ONE"

TO THE EDITOR:

I have been a reader of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY since September 14, 1914, and have missed but one number in that time. I am enclosing ten cents, for which please send me the November 11, 1916, number.

I have read quite a number of fiction magazines, and can sincerely say that the ALL-STORY WEEKLY excels them all, without exception. As this is my first letter to you, I cannot but help express my appreciation for the good stories that I have read in the magazine, and I read every number from cover to cover.

I like the serial stories best, and have never found but one or two so far that I did not like. My favorite stories are—"Custer of the Cavalry," "A Soldier of the Legion," "The Coasts of Adventure," "The Curious Quest of Mr. Ernest Bliss," "Sand," "Polaris—of the Snows," "The Iron Rider," "The Beloved Traitor." There are many others, too numerous to mention.

Would like to read some more of the *Semi-Dual* stories. There is a lesson in every one. "The Reckless Age" was certainly fine. Would like to see a sequel to "The Return of the Mucker."

Anxiously waiting the November 11, 1916, number, I am,

H. D. GROSS.

Falconer, New York.

"A WOMAN SCORNE"

TO THE EDITOR:

I have been reading ALL-STORY WEEKLY for some time, not as a subscriber, nor even regular-

ly; but whenever I could get hold of one. What I want to write about is the story, "Flaming Hearts," by Katharine Eggleston: "Romance of a Woman Scorned."

Remembering the quotation, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," from Shakespeare or some other literary fan, that title, particularly the last part, sure caught my interest, and I "kept my eye on the ball" all through, expecting to read how *Esther Ellis*, the woman scorned, was going to end up. I thought sure she would have her inning just as soon as *Philip Courteney* got out of jail, or, anyway, after the honeymoon, but I was disappointed. I wish Miss Eggleston would finish her yarn.

I frequently see your weekly in Manila and Shanghai.

WM. DENNING.

Hong Kong, China.

to leave to our imagination what happened to *Paula* ("The Fire Flower") when she reached the city, and please hurry Mr. Gregory up with the sequel.

I love Edgar Rice Burroughs. Am crazy about the *Tarzan* tales; have them all in book form that have been published.

What has become of Achmed Abdullah? His "God of the Invincibly Strong Arms" was extremely clever. As is also E. K. Means. In fact, the whole lot of writers are so good it is hard to pick a favorite.

Well, I have done very well for a beginner, so will try and not wear my welcome out. Here's good luck to you, and your very clever staff of writers, and long life to the old *Cavalier*.

MRS. C. S. NAEGELE.

645 Park Street, South,
Columbus, Ohio.

EACH WEEK A CENTURY

TO THE EDITOR:

I wish I could find words to express my appreciation of your magazine, but if you only knew how hard it is to wait a whole week for the next number, and how much pleasure I derive when at last, after a century or so, that week finally passes, and how eagerly I scan the index to see if Dr. Means has one of his wonderful stories there (for that is the first thing I do), and if he only knew how very disappointed my husband and I are when there is nothing by him, he would surely have a heart, indeed, for I know he has many more admirers besides us. He is just the best ever. Of course, I do not want to be unjust, but he is my favorite.

When are we to have some more *Tarzan* stories, or something by the author. He is also one of the finest ever.

I live in such a dreary, lonesome little hole, just a tent town or rag town, with no amusements, not even a movie, and I do not know how I would ever stand it at all without the ALL-STORY WEEKLY. Long may its editor and authors live, and let the good work go on.

MRS. W. A. JEWELL.

New Healdton, Oklahoma.

HARD TO PICK A FAVORITE

TO THE EDITOR:

Although I have been a reader of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for years, this is my first attempt at writing.

First off, let me tell you we were very much peeved when you rechristened our favorite magazine from the *Cavalier*, which we think very appropriate. Another kick I have that it is only issued once a week. Also please ask Jackson Gregory if he is going to have the nerve

"OFF AGAIN, ETC., FINNEGAN" WRITES

TO THE EDITOR:

I was tickled rigid to see that you had inveigled another yarn from our good old friend, Hank Phillips! Since O. Henry is gone, we have been needing Henry Wallace more than ever. Writers cannot be intelligently compared. No intelligent person ever attempts it. Only critics do it. But there is the same loving fooling, the same purposeful slighting of every element in the story except that of human kindness, in both these men. I was happy as a clam in a tidal wave to meet old *Zeke Scraggs* again, and I hope to goodness Phillips may even give us a visit with *Red Saunders* once more. By the way, you tell William Slavens McNutt that I shall cease to love him if ever again he does as cruel a story as that "Frozen Hell." Readers who aren't as hard as *Big Bill* don't want to see even the worst of men treated so. We might not care to know men had been so handled, but it isn't right to make us stick around and drink coffee with *Big Bill* by his warm fire and watch the thing happen. No. McNutt can write things so much kindlier than that, though just as strong.

Keep the magazine going. You are ringing the bell with almost miraculous frequency.

Yours admiringly,

STRICKLAND GILLILAN.

Roland Park, Maryland.

LETTERETTES

Please send me the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for December 23, for which I enclose stamps.

I have never seen a letter in the Heart to Heart Talks from Shelbyville. I think there is no magazine to beat the ALL-STORY. I have

never missed a copy, until the above, for three years.

"The Black Cloud" and "Tarzan of the Apes" can't be beat. Let's have some more of them.

CHESTER R. BOKEY.

R. R. No. 3,
Shelbyville, Indiana.

Enclosed you will find one dollar, for which please renew my subscription to the ALL-STORY magazine, which expires February 3.

I think the ALL-STORY WEEKLY is fine, but I seldom read the short stories, as I do not care much for them.

I wish you would publish some more stories like "The Fugitive Sleuth," "Breath of the Dragon," and some of Zane Grey's works.

R. L. BROCKMAN.

Norfolk, Virginia.

I have been a reader of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY since the copy containing the first *Tarzan* tale by Edgar Rice Burroughs. I have read every one of Burroughs's stories, and they are all tip-top.

I think you had better resurrect *Tarzan* again, and also some more of Captain Dingle's sea tales. "Nuala O'Malley" was a pippin good story, too.

I like serials; bring them on and it will be O. K.

R. D. M.

Bridgeport, Connecticut.

I have just 142 ALL-STORY WEEKLY magazines on hand now, straight back for 142 weeks. How is that for a poor working woman?

There is no other magazine can come within ten miles of it for an A No. 1 entertainment.

Tarzan—oh, you *Tarzan*! Hurry and fetch back the son of *Tarzan*. A. E. Dingle, Zane Grey—oh, well, all of them are too good and well known to boost, and I read everything in each magazine from cover to cover.

But I say hurrah for the ALL-STORY WEEKLY every time. I will always boost, or be found trying to.

MRS. C. M. KNAUF.

325 Benton Street,
Hot Springs, Arkansas.

I have read your wonderful magazine for many years, and trust that I shall never stop reading it.

"The Story Without a Title" is beautiful. Please tell Mr. Soutar that I and others who have read it thank him.

Your stories are getting better every week, and hope you will keep on giving us stories such

as "Tamsie of the Tower" and "On a Stallion Shod With Fire." Mr. Titus really makes you see the West as I have often pictured it in my mind.

MADELINE CHRISTIE.

151 Hancock Street,
Dorchester, Massachusetts.

I wish to speak a word of praise for your splendid magazine, the ALL-STORY WEEKLY. I believe that no magazine before the public offers so much *real* fiction as the ALL-STORY WEEKLY.

Your recent story, "The Story Without a Title," is a masterpiece. Such writers as E. K. Means, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the author of "Almost Immortal" (Austin Hall) certainly deserve credit for the products of their pens.

Wishing you continued success, and hoping you will give us more stories on the order of those we have had lately,

L. R. BARTH.

New Martinsville,
West Virginia.

I have finished "Opportunity" and "The Holy Scare." They were certainly fine. "Mimi" was a treat to say the least. I haven't read a story yet in the ALL-STORY that I didn't enjoy.

MRS. RUTH WATSON.

Care of Camp 10,
Mancelona, Michigan.

I like "The Holy Scare" so much; also "Mid-Ocean," and "The Matrimaniac." The short stories are a real treat. Have been reading the *Cavalier*, and the *All-Story Cavalier*, and now the ALL-STORY WEEKLY for many years. Think it is a very fine magazine.

ANDREW COOPER FAIN.

3927 S. First Street,
Louisville, Kentucky.

I got the first instalment of "Too Much Efficiency" and cannot rest until I get the rest of it. I have just been reading "Opportunity," by Edgar Franklin. It is a scream from first to last. E. K. Means's "Tickfall" stories are also fine. In fact I like almost every one that comes out.

MRS. H. E. LONG.

R. I. B. 57,
Bethany, Missouri.

Would like to have sequel to "The Return of the Mucker." *Bridge* was a fine character, hope to read of him finding his *Penelope*.

J. A. M.

Providence, Rhode Island.

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There are hundreds of thousands of men with clear brains, good health and plenty of ambition who ought to succeed, but who are regularly "fired", "kicked out" or "held down". WHY? Read the answer in this book "Ten Years' Promotion In One" — a book that will open your eyes to some plain, common-sense success facts.

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Within the past two years the buying power of the American dollar has shrunk from 30 to 50 per cent. If your income is not more today than it was a year or two ago, your earning power too, has shrunk in proportion.

Today, big incomes are virtually begging for men to come and earn them. A recent editorial in the Saturday Evening Post on "Help Wanted at \$5000 a Year" referred to a business man who complained that "At \$10 a week he had three applications for every job; at \$100 a week, two jobs for every applicant." A want ad for a \$15 a week job in Chicago brought 171 written applicants. A \$5000 a year position advertised by the same concern at the same time in the same paper did not bring a single applicant—NOT ONE.

Big business is in need of capable executives, auditors, comptrollers, business and office managers, traffic managers, legally-trained men, bank officials, certified public accountants, cost accountants, sales managers, etc. Any one of these positions is within the reach of the wide-awake man who has intelligence and common-sense and will apply himself. No man need be content to do under-paid, disagreeable work, with the abundant opportunities trained men now have to pick positions with worth-while incomes.

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